

**‘Out of the Quarrel with Others’:  
the Conflict between Self and Community in Modern Irish Writing**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis examines how the literature of W.B. Yeats and James Joyce influenced the writings of Liam O'Flaherty, Patrick Kavanagh and John McGahern. The primary purpose of this research is to question what motivates these individual writers and how great art universally illustrates a fundamental quarrel between self and community. The thesis considers the personal experiences and literary influences on each of the selected writers, examining how the great diversity of literature in twentieth-century Ireland was shaped by events both within and outside of the country. Although the writers in this study are open to various theoretical readings, this dissertation does not confine itself to one particular methodology. The main concern is with how each individual artist in a given text interprets his own self and community, analysing how the art form helps modern readers to understand the many historical and cultural processes at work in Irish literature and society.

## Acknowledgements

The roots of this research are 'in the school books', in lessons delivered at St MacNissi's College, Garron Tower, almost twenty years ago. Here I recall writing a short essay expressing my personal opinion of Yeats' poetry, with particular emphasis on the quotation: 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry'. I am indebted to Mr Paddy Close, and my close teaching colleague, Dr Fiona Lynch, in the intervening years, for the inspiration to elaborate on this subject through rigorous academic research and who, amongst others (Karolina Shaw, Heather Thorkensen and Dr John Kenny), suggested some authors to read and research. I am especially grateful to my parents, Margaret and Brendan Mitchell, for the encouragement and love of literature they instilled in me as a young boy growing up in The Glens of Antrim, where 'the magic of the fields' are rarely 'disturbed' in my imagination.

This current research could not have been written without the support and friendship of Dr Frank Shovlin, who has remained an inspiration throughout. Frank's discussions have always steered me in the right direction, allowing me to think about the notion of art and what essentially inspires the individual writer. His input in relation to the various writers in this study, particularly John McGahern, has proved invaluable to the research. I am indebted to him and to all colleagues at the Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool, for the financial and professional support involved, notably Dorothy Lynch, Viola Segeroth, Dr Diane Urquhart, Dr Niall Carson, Dr Kevin Bean, Dr Maria Power and all researchers who have helped to encourage my interest in the history and literature of Ireland.

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I should especially like to thank my patient and loving wife Katharine and I wish to dedicate this research to her and to my new-born son, Henry Patrick Mitchell, who arrived the week after I finished the PhD. Thus begins a new chapter in our lives.

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## **Introduction: 'Out of the Quarrel with Others'**

This research is concerned with the development of modern Irish writing and examines the theory that great art is born out of the quarrel or conflict between the individual writer and community. The inspiration for this study can be found in the writings of W. B. Yeats and James Joyce, and the opening chapter considers the impact of these literary figures on the generation of writers which followed. It is my contention that these writers engage directly with issues of cultural identity in Irish society, recognising both a need to express the inner life of the artist and the individual's connection to history and community. The purpose of this research is to show how modern Irish writing is influenced by events or circumstances within Ireland and also by factors outside of it, namely in the common understanding that all artists are connected to each other, universally driven by personal beliefs and principles which often appear in conflict with the society or community to which they belong.

In the literature of Yeats and Joyce we begin to comprehend the modern notion of selfhood in Ireland through the extensive cataloguing of human nature and experience. Both artists subscribe to the belief that they are part of a unique literary tradition which is responsible for preserving the artistic spirit or soul within the work of art. We find this spiritual expression in the poetry of James Clarence Mangan and Thomas Moore, and also in the political rhetoric of Thomas Davis,

before they appear prominently in the writings of the next generation in Ireland. Recent critics such as Declan Kiberd, Terence Brown and Heather Laird have revisited the writings of twentieth-century scholars like Daniel Corkery, notably in works such as *The Hidden Ireland* (1924), to examine a unique Irish literary tradition which, according to Corkery, originated not in English verse or literature, but in the ancient Celtic or Bardic schools.<sup>1</sup> *The Hidden Ireland*, a study of Irish life in the eighteenth century, explores a thriving 'Irish-language literary culture', singular in its 'intellectual passion', with a poetic tradition which 'exerted great influence in the nation's life'.<sup>2</sup> It is possible to see a similar process at work in the writings of Yeats and Joyce, where the prestige of an ancient Irish literary tradition is suddenly reborn or translated into the domestic framework or context which is modern Ireland.

Yeats illustrates the existence of a modern 'Irish literature' when he engages with 'a company' of writers to 'Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways'.<sup>3</sup> He recognises that poetry, tradition, romance and the 'indomitable' Irish spirit are a cast set apart, whilst his various intellectual influences suggest a greater vision for Ireland on an international scale. At the end of the nineteenth century Yeats initiates a cultural revival in Ireland, believing that 'the idea of a nation' can be understood through the

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<sup>1</sup> Corkery argues that this tradition became overshadowed by English colonialism and 'by the cultural achievements of the Anglo-Irish community', whilst the remnants of this 'hidden' culture continued throughout the ages, only to be translated into modern verse by nineteenth-century poets who directly influenced Yeats and Joyce (literary figures such as Samuel Ferguson and Mangan). Corkery's theory is supported by acclaimed writers like Frank O'Connor in *The Backward Look* (1967).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son Ltd, 1941), pp. 61-64; Heather Laird refers to the research of Kiberd and Brown and this 'thriving Irish-language literary culture' in *Daniel Corkery's Cultural Criticism: Selected Writings* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> William Butler Yeats, 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time', *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works: including poems, plays and critical prose*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 13.

development of 'national institutions' aimed at creating 'a simple moral understanding' of life, and used as the model for 'national success'.<sup>4</sup> Joyce identifies with the 'national spirit' which Yeats invokes, viewing history and literature in Ireland as interconnected and inherited from various sources: Celtic, European and global, an artistic heritage which is neither disconnected from the past nor invented in the present, thereby lending itself to a panoramic vision of universal selfhood. Shakespeare's creation of the ghost of Hamlet's father is mentioned explicitly in *Ulysses* (1922), not least because Joyce is interested in the mind of the greatest English poet and writer of modern times, but because he is playing with the notion of what the artist's desire to create is really all about. He recognises primarily that the work of art is an essential dialogue of self and soul where the personality of the writer is at its centre.

The complexity of defining identity in Ireland is rooted in the different cultural traditions which exist in the country, but for writers like Yeats and Joyce there is little doubt that the notion of a personal or individual 'self' exists universally. This feeling is articulated through the artist's expression of his own identity (often through the mask or symbol) and most acutely in the Yeatsian sense of the individual's connection to a deeply ingrained national spirit ('that ancient sect'). Joyce especially reacts against the restriction of such influences to one particular class of people or cultural tradition, and when his allusions serve to question identity ('you talk to me of nationality, language and religion'), he can also

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<sup>4</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 493-494.

challenge Shakespeare's allusion to the Irish 'nation' in *Henry V*, articulating his response through characters like Leopold Bloom, when he defines his country as: 'Ireland [. . .] I was born here. Ireland'.<sup>5</sup> Bloom's imagination recognises the idea of a 'nation' defined in terms of 'the same people living in the same place' or people 'living in different places'.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Strong Spirit* (2013), Andrew Gibson illustrates the way in which Joyce's mind is shaped by this living reality of history, as if it is a present and occupying force in his life. He explores how for many Irish nationalists at the turn of the twentieth century the desire was to look 'outside Ireland' for inspiration, reaching beyond its shores with a kind of inner faith or 'autonomy' which Joyce recognised and embraced in his paper on Mangan delivered before the Literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin in 1902.<sup>7</sup> He reveals his message in one particular passage, reflecting:

Mangan is the type of his race. History encloses him so straitly that even his fiery moments do not free him from it. He, too, cries out [. . .] against the injustice of despoilers [. . .] And because this tradition is so much with him he has accepted it with all its griefs and failures, and has not known how to change it, as the strong spirit knows and would bequeath it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, intro. Declan Kiberd (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 430.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Gibson, *The Strong Spirit: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in the Writings of James Joyce, 1898-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 18-22.

<sup>8</sup> Joyce, 'James Clarence Mangan', *James Joyce Occasional, Critical and Political Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 59.



As Gibson sees it, Joyce is both 'supremely modern and supremely a historicist', and this was perhaps because of the way in which his art could transcend the politics or complexities of the moment, through a style and form that effectively incorporated the individual and national spirit as one.<sup>9</sup> But for Joyce, as with many of the writers before and after him, it is not enough to see Ireland as a peculiar case, an island all on its own, living in the shadow of empire or a particular religious tradition. Ireland is not separate from other cultures in the sense of what drives or motivates the writer, but it is shaped by its own 'traditions' and historical circumstances, where problems of ethnicity and identity remain as unresolved and questionable today as they appeared in the past.

In recent scholarship, Terence Brown writes about a particular form of 'Irish self' which Yeats adapted from Shakespeare - one where 'antithesis' or the mask played an important role in defining the poet's art and identity. Brown argues that in modern academia there is a need to 'explore in detail an Irish interrogation of the idea of the self'.<sup>10</sup> This is indeed a complex undertaking, principally because what is meant by 'the self' is debatable from a sociological, psychological and literary viewpoint. In the context of this dissertation, the 'Irish self' is defined as a way of relating specifically to the viewpoint of the independent artist who is either living in Ireland or connected to Irish society. In this sense it is merely a substitute for a

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Gibson, *The Strong Spirit: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in the Writings of James Joyce, 1898-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Terence Brown, *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 71. Declan Kiberd describes 'The Irish self' as 'a project' with a 'characteristic text', inviting 'the reader to become a co-creator with the author' in working towards 'the completed work of art', *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation* (Dublin: Vintage, 1996), p. 120.

particular form of personal identity, where the writer is shaped or influenced by his own local history, literature and domestic life, as well as by wider global and international affairs.

If questions about identity or 'the self' are open to interpretation, it is necessary to consider throughout this dissertation how they are viewed in world philosophy, psychology and literature. Martin Heidegger's philosophy, for example, questions the nature of 'being' when he advocates that 'the self' is inextricably bound to the structure of society (past and present) and the environment to which the subject belongs.<sup>11</sup> For such reasons, we need to be conscious of the setting in which the writer lives and the personal experiences which invariably shape the author's desire to ask the question: 'who am I'?<sup>12</sup> The purpose here must be identify what we mean by 'the self' when we talk about Irish literature and society and then ultimately to explain how this concept can be connected to the individual writer.

Many critics agree with Heidegger that 'there is a real philosophical problem about the existence and nature of the self', pondering the essential meaning of the term.<sup>13</sup> Neuroscientists often explain the idea of a self or 'multiple selves' in terms of 'an illusion', simply because 'our brain creates the experience of our self as a model -

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<sup>11</sup> 'We do not *know* what 'Being' means [. . .] *But this vague average understanding of Being is still a Fact*', [italics are the author's] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Ingmar Persson asserts: 'We refer to ourselves by means of tokens of the first-person pronoun, in the case of English, 'I' [. . .] if anything is one's self, it is the referent of these uses of 'I', 'Self-doubt: why we are not identical to things of any kind', *The Self*, ed. Galen Strawson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Galen Strawson, 'The Self', ed. Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Shear, *Models of the Self* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 1999), p. 3.

a cohesive, integrated character', and in this case 'it is the external world that switches us from one character to another'.<sup>14</sup> This argument is sometimes associated with David Hume's 'bundle theory' of the self or with current research about the connections of neurons in our brain. All these viewpoints fail to explain 'why consciousness emerges at all [which] still remains one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of modern science'.<sup>15</sup>

Galen Strawson contends that our 'ordinary, human sense of self' is essentially 'the sense that people have of themselves as being, specifically, a mental presence [. . .] a conscious subject of experience, that has a certain character or personality [. . .] a distinctively mental phenomenon'.<sup>16</sup> In this summary we find a significant starting point for understanding the nature of the 'Irish self' because in the study of each selected writer in this thesis we find an urge to express some form of 'mental presence' or preoccupation. How exactly this 'conscious self' is interpreted, whether man is a complex machine made up of different parts or that he is determined by an immortal essence or soul becomes a major preoccupation of the writer, especially when the art form is connected to experiences of a deeply private

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Hood, *The Self Illusion: Who Do You Think You Are?* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd, 2011), 'Prologue: The Reflected Self', xi-xiii.

<sup>15</sup> David Hume suggested that there was no such thing as a unified self, insisting that 'man is a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement', selected from *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Book I, Part IV, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 252. David Eagleman suggests that we are essentially 'works in progress', defined by the changing neurons in our brain. He accepts that he cannot give a definitive explanation for 'consciousness', quoted in a recent documentary entitled 'The Brain' (Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2016) on BBC4.

<sup>16</sup> Galen Strawson, *Models of the Self*, p. 6.

and spiritual nature.<sup>17</sup>

Concerns about selfhood or identity cannot be confined to the viewpoints expressed by individual artists alone, and so it is worth considering in what way the writer universally occupies a special place in society, where the art form can help people to understand or examine the particular relationship between themselves and their communities. This has prompted writers such as Corkery to assert that that 'the soul of a people' can be found most intimately 'in their literature', often dependent on the personal experiences, opinions and circumstances of the individual writer.<sup>18</sup> In the case of novelists like Liam O'Flaherty (Chapter 2), there is a need to write for 'the satisfaction of the soul' and to recognise the influence of community, which includes both Irish experiences and the impact of his English mentor Edward Garnett, who introduced him to a rich European literary tradition beyond Irish circles. There is also an effort to come to terms with this writer's active engagement in the horrors of trench warfare and his involvement in the Irish Civil War; how his own physical and mental torments impacted on his essential quarrel with community, urging him to find relief from personal trauma through the expression

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<sup>17</sup> In *The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul* (New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1981), ed. Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, Richard Dawkins explains our identity in terms of genetics: 'We were built as gene machines, created to pass on our genes', 'Selfish Genes and Selfish Memes', p. 143. Alan Turing's essay in the same book, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' is interesting because he challenges the belief that 'Thinking is a function of man's immortal soul', although he also claims: 'I do not wish to give the impression that I think there is no mystery about consciousness', pp. 57-61. William Barrett has suggested that 'Man, the microcosm, is just another machine within the universal machine that is the cosmos', and yet we must not lose our grasp on the 'idea of the conscious mind', *Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 154-166.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Corkery, 'Introduction', *The Hidden Ireland*, vii-xi. Corkery supports the argument of many of the Irish writers in this study, reacting against 'a slave-mind' mentality which restricts the influences and heritage of a literature which existed in Ireland.

of art.

Whereas O'Flaherty's direct experiences of war and political revolution in Ireland played a pivotal role in shaping the nature and content of his writing, both Patrick Kavanagh (Chapter 3) and John McGahern (Chapter 4) react against the constraints of their community through the common desire to deny any specific monolithic definition of 'Irishness'. They recognise the limitations of nationality in the expression of selfhood, equating this quality with a particular form of 'anti-art' and a denial of the spiritual or moral purposes of their writing.

The desire for any writer must surely be a coming to terms with one's own nature; a way of making sense of a particular political and social environment on individual terms. T. S. Eliot's reading of Joyce's *Ulysses*, when viewed in this light, becomes a natural response to an author's 'way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'.<sup>19</sup> The writer is born out of the desire to find answers to human existence, to make sense of the muddle and confusion of our lives; to probe into the mystery of the self. There exists in Ireland a long tradition of external influences which seek to find such an answer, ranging from the philosophy of the ancient Greeks to the beginnings of Christian theology and practice, extending to more modern preoccupations with political revolution and national liberty. It is necessary here to consider the impact of such ideas on the forging of modern Irish writing.

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<sup>19</sup> T. S. Eliot's essay "'Ulysses': Order and Myth", *The Dial* (Nov 1923), pp. 480-483.

The first comprehensive unpacking of the self in Western literature was initiated by Plato in works such as the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.<sup>20</sup> In these texts Plato theorised that the human soul was an essentially immaterial substance and argued in favour of its immortality, dividing the self into three categories: 'the appetitive' (associated with our pleasures), the 'spirited' (our emotions) and 'the rational' (our mind or conscious).<sup>21</sup> He believed that only the rational part of our true selves ('nous') could possibly survive bodily death and defined the world according to a dual philosophy relating to what was visible or known and what was invisible or unknown. He suggested that the 'soul is what a person essentially is' and made a distinction 'between the souls of ordinary people, which persist eternally but constantly change due to their attention to earthly things, and the souls of philosophers, or lovers of wisdom (*philosophia*), like Socrates, who by seeking to know the eternal become one with it'.<sup>22</sup>

Plato's successor and student, Aristotle, was to have an even greater influence on the history of Christian theology for the next two thousand years, advocating that the body and soul are inseparable, although his thoughts on the nature of the rational part of the soul and the self were to create controversy and debate over

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<sup>20</sup> Raymond Martin and John Barressi, *Personal Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 7, argue that 'the view of the self that he [Plato] expressed in the *Phaedo* was destined to become one of the most influential theories of the self ever expressed'.

<sup>21</sup> *Personal Identity*, ed. Raymond Martin and John Barressi, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> This understanding of the soul is developed further in the teachings of modern Christianity, but its function now depends on the perspective or 'religious belief' of the individual. The argument against unity of self and soul may now be more popular with people who do not believe in an afterlife. See Raymond Martin and John Barressi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 13 and p. 303.

succeeding centuries.<sup>23</sup> This Christian theological influence on the understanding of the self is considered in Chapters 3 and 4, mainly through the writings of theologians like St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, who traditionally occupy a prominent role in Church teachings and within the Irish education system.

In modern Irish literature the preoccupation with Greek mythology and philosophy helps to form some understanding of the self in Irish culture. The writings of Plato particularly influenced Yeats and Kavanagh, in the efforts that these poets placed on coming to terms with a new and emerging culture around them. Kavanagh invokes the Socratic notion of a 'divine sign' or a 'Moral Law' which defines art throughout the ages, whereas Yeats reaches out to a turbulent, mythological past in order to express the violence within contemporary Irish society or to understand the personalities with whom he is most intimate, a literary trait that poets like Seamus Heaney have inherited.<sup>24</sup> In 'No Second Troy', Yeats compares the mercurial nature of the mythological Helen of Troy with his own love for the revolutionary Maud Gonne, ending the poem with the rhetorical question: 'Was there another Troy for her to Burn'? In 'Among School Children', he tries to make

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<sup>23</sup> 'In Aristotle's view, it may be that only what we have in common with each other [. . .] survives the grave', suggesting that there may be some universal or artistic spirit which connects all of us', *Personal Identity*, pp. 8-9. Martin and Barressi make a distinction between the self and soul today, arguing that belief in the soul 'has fallen, though there is doubt that 'the self has fallen [. . .] In ancient Greece, selves, in the earlier incarnation as *psyches* [souls], were introduced in order to explain life [as] a *source* of unity, not a *result* of unity. When in the eighteenth century, selves replaced souls, in the view of some theorists, selves retained this unifying function', *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* pp. 298- 301.

<sup>24</sup> Heaney, like Yeats, uses history as a way of coming to terms with the violence in his country. His interest in Norse mythology and folklore led him to P. V. Glob's *The Bog People* (1965), an inspiration for the Bog Poems and connecting Irish experience to other 'tribal' situations in the world.

sense of his own aging body and spiritual state by dabbling in the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, asserting:

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays  
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;  
Solider Aristotle played the taws  
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;  
Word-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras  
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings.<sup>25</sup>

Since human nature apparently does not change, it is convenient for Yeats to draw upon the philosophy of ancient masters in order to expose the inadequacies of an imperfect present, an Ireland wrought by civil war and political revolution.<sup>26</sup> Yeats believes that 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry' – a statement which is a source or starting point here for the understanding of modern Irish literature.<sup>27</sup> This quotation serves as the title for this dissertation because it can be attributed to virtually every Irish writer who is moved by a public and private 'quarrel', discovering his own personal self to be in direct conflict with his surroundings. The concern for the poet is a coming to terms with his own nature and society, a world which Yeats finds to be materialistic and unheroic, transient and degenerate, the latter of which is embodied in his own elderly

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<sup>25</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Among School Children', *The Major Works*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>26</sup> Plato and Aristotle each tried to make sense of the self and Pythagoras was responsible for promoting the theory of *metempsychosis* (transmigration of the soul), by combining the theories of Plato and Aristotle. In Yeats' exploration of these three philosophers he was trying to make sense of the human condition and his own spiritual and physical state in modern Ireland. Joyce also referred to the terms 'metempsychosis' and 'transmigration of souls' in Chapter Four of *Ulysses*.

<sup>27</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', *The Major Works*, p. 411.



scarecrow image ('Old clothes upon a stick to scare a bird').<sup>28</sup> This vision of the Irish self looks directly to the past in order to find expression and continuity in the present. Yeats thus relies upon a mythological cast of Gaelic heroes such as Cuchulain, Deirdre, Fergus and Oisín, in order to revive a feeling of national prestige and to bring to modern Ireland a sense of its former heroism and glory; to breathe life into what he sees as a dying nation. He is not alone in finding strength in a mythological past. Although Joyce believes that it is not practically possible to recreate a pure and unadulterated image of 'ancient Ireland' in the modern world, he understands the significance of historical processes and parallels, and uses the timeless universality of Homer's *Odyssey* as a way of providing epical structure to the ordinariness of human existence in *Ulysses*. Kavanagh is similarly content to boast that he has 'lived in important places', using the *Iliad* as the inspiration for a poetry shaped by 'A local row'.<sup>29</sup>

Many writers over time have questioned expressions of identity or 'nationality' in Ireland, including Yeats, Joyce and Kavanagh. It has also been suggested that Ireland is not a nation, that it has never been a nation in any real sense, in perhaps the way that America or England or Greece or Costa Rica are perceived as 'nations'; and yet, if this is the case, why then do we use expressions such as the 'Irish'? Is it not possible to see other 'nations' as equally fragmented in the way that we see Ireland? Yeats and Joyce would likely agree. In this very real

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<sup>28</sup> Yeats, 'Among School Children', p. 115.

<sup>29</sup> Kavanagh, 'Epic', *Patrick Kavanagh: Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p. 184.

sense, we may choose to ask the question: are notions of identity and the self really as fixed as they seem or are they in a state of transition? This research is concerned with such questions about Irish identity and with what exactly drives or motivates the literary artist universally.

The influence of Yeats and Joyce on Irish literature is first explored in Chapter 1, where the conflicting nature of the self is illustrated in how the individual artist's view of personal identity defines modern Irish culture and politics. Yeats' and Joyce's legacy is shown to impact directly on succeeding generations of artists, namely writers such as Liam O'Flaherty, Patrick Kavanagh and John McGahern. What is most interesting about these selected writers is that they exist as the inheritors of Yeats and Joyce (sharing a similar set of values), and assert the inherent power of the artistic personality or a universal belief in the moral nature of their art. They also present a challenge to the Irish literary tradition of Yeats, Joyce and Mangan, by offering different facets of individual human experience which are relevant to particular localities within Irish history and literary culture. They have been selected primarily because they best illustrate the way in which art is born out of the quarrel with others, giving particular expression to self and community in modern Irish writing.

In Chapter 2 the focus on how O'Flaherty vehemently exposes the 'passionate intensity' of the Irish artist is defined through the context of violence and civil war. Here the analysis of O'Flaherty's fiction questions the particular Irish and European influences on the writer's art and what essentially drives and encourages his needs

as an artist.

In Chapter 3, the challenge to the specific nature of 'Irishness' and what constitutes 'the self' in Ireland is debated in the writings of Kavanagh, an artist who offers a compelling assessment of literature and life in his country. This poet highlights a traditional belief in a real self or distinct personality at the heart of all great writing and the links to Yeats, Joyce and O'Flaherty are therefore significant, as are the various quarrels with institutions and movements in Irish society.

In the final chapter, the writer's longing to 'go inland' into the far reaches of the artistic soul is further explored in the novels and short stories of John McGahern. As the most recent writer in this study, McGahern is our closest link to a literary tradition in Ireland which focuses specifically on the self and the writer's relationship with community. The parallels with other writers are also considered within a literary and philosophical context.

The core of this research analyses the conflict which exists between the self (in this case the identity and character of the individual writer) and community. This fundamental 'quarrel' is shown to have its roots in the birth of the new independent Ireland, influenced by literary figures such as Yeats and Joyce who have a lasting impact on every writer who succeeds them, inevitably determining the direction and perception of our culture. It is this tension between author and community, the private concerns in the quarrel with oneself and the public expectations in the quarrel with others, which is shown to drive the three writers of the next generation

into an intellectual battle with the society which surrounds them. In essence, their literature is born out of the struggle between nature and nurture.

## Chapter 1: The Self in Irish Writing: Yeats, Joyce and the birth of a nation

“Who is it that can tell me who I am?” Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Act I Scene IV).

The defining characteristic of Irish writing since the period of the Literary Revival has been the conflict between self and community. W. B. Yeats made this very clear when he declared that ‘All creation is from conflict, whether with our own mind or with that of others’.<sup>1</sup> Since he was responsible for creating a new literary movement in Ireland and successfully co-founding with Lady Gregory the country’s first national theatre, Yeats became the inspiration or catalyst for a new generation of writers who sought to define and question Irish culture and identity. The search for the self in modern Irish literature and society must begin with Yeats because he was the organiser and innovator of a new ‘heroic style’ of writing and the first ‘national poet’ in Ireland to question the nature of Irish identity coherently in the years leading to the formation of the Irish Free State.<sup>2</sup> His poetry defines the ultimate quarrel between the artistic self and community, the struggle between private emotions and the need for the poet to embrace the demands of an emerging modern Ireland in the face of major social and political change. Yeats was one of the first Irish writers to recognise that the personal concerns of the artist in a new cultural and literary movement would ultimately lead to a public quarrel with others and

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<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), p. 576.

<sup>2</sup> Yeats supports this argument in his article ‘Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature’ (1892): ‘I tried to explain a philosophy of poetry in which I was profoundly interested, and to show the dependence [. . .] of all great art and literature upon conviction and upon heroic life,’ ed. Mark Storey, *Poetry and Ireland Since 1800: A Source Book* (London and New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1998), p. 74.

that it was the artist's role to define and come to terms with this conflict, as he declared in 1923: 'We were to find ourselves in a quarrel with public opinion that compelled us against our will and the will of our players to become always more realistic, substituting dialect for verse, common speech for dialect'.<sup>3</sup>

Yeats learned from his own father the need for the poet to 'preserve the integrity of the soul' by making 'every kind of change and every kind of experiment and venture'.<sup>4</sup> The secret was to be found in the stylistic art of renewal, a way of probing into the nature of the Irish self. What is particularly striking about his poetry is that as a celebrated artist he moved with the times, adapted his literary form and style and embraced the changes which were taking place in the society around him. He had a lasting impact on every succeeding Irish writer, in particular his most distinguished literary rival, James Joyce. Recent academic studies suggest greater links between these writers than traditionally agreed. As this chapter examines, Yeats and Joyce together initiated the first comprehensive understanding of the self in Irish writing, inspiring succeeding literary artists such as Liam O'Flaherty, Patrick Kavanagh and John McGahern to question the nature of their identity and expose the fundamental conflict with their community. Paradoxically, those very writers who sought to challenge or demythologise Yeats' 'romantic Ireland', shared similar views and sentiments about the relationship between art and the individual.

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<sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, Nobel Lecture to the Royal Academy of Sweden, 'The Irish Dramatic Movement', *Autobiographies*, p. 562.

<sup>4</sup> J. B. Yeats' letter to his son in which he describes the poet's soul: 'this inner and outer self, in forcing its way that it may preserve its integrity, must be permitted to make every kind of change and every kind of experiment and venture,' ed. Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), p. 19.

## Yeats and the Irish Self

The difficulty in defining the 'self' in Irish literature relates to the fact that identity and history in Ireland are as diverse as they are complex. Declan Kiberd illustrates this point in his landmark text *Inventing Ireland* (1995) when he examines Shakespeare's interpretation of the Irishman Captain MacMorris in *Henry V*, who appears to question the nature of 'Irishness' when he passionately proclaims: "What ish my Nation?" Kiberd comments:

In Shakespeare's rudimentary portrait are to be found those traits of garrulity, pugnacity and a rather unfocused ethnic pride which would later signalise the Stage Irishman — along with a faintly patronising amusement on the part of the portraitist that the Irish should be so touchy on questions of identity.<sup>5</sup>

Irish identity from the perspective of the Elizabethan Englishman is predicated on the notion of a recognisable self and other where the 'portrait' or image of the Irish is seen only in terms of degeneracy, at all times subordinate to the refined 'portrait' of the civilized English. What is even more certain, according to Kiberd, is that the 'struggle for self-definition is conducted within language', and because the English were the recognised 'lords of language' the whole concept of Irishness was invented by them.<sup>6</sup> It was taken as fact that in order to understand Englishness the Irish were 'invented' or presented as the perfect foils to their colonial masters. However interesting or credible the theory, such claims may also create misleading or

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<sup>5</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

simplified views of Irish culture and identity which are far from satisfactory.

It could be argued that all nations are created on the basis of invented ideas or concepts, modelled either on existing traditions or political ideologies such as democracy. Why should Ireland be seen as any different? One of the suggested reasons is that the nation was colonized several times, leading to various perceptions of what actually constitutes 'Irishness'. It is often argued that the country did not develop like other industrial or emerging 'nation states' in the nineteenth century such as England, France or Germany, simply because 'under occupation [the Irish] could never be their distinctive selves'.<sup>7</sup> Out of this complex identity grew the two separate cultures and traditions which we know in Ireland today as Catholic and Protestant, emerging from the split ideologies of Nationalism and Unionism. Willard Potts suggests that Yeats and Joyce were instrumental in the process of 'uniting the two Irelands [Gaelic Ireland and Anglo-Ireland]' and that Joyce 'alone wrote explicitly about the relationship between the two Irelands'.<sup>8</sup> Those critics who present the former interpretation of Irish identity tell a different story, expressing an ardent faith in the existence of a distinct Irish 'nation', defined by a Gaelic language and culture long before the process of colonization, advocating that 'once those early Irish began to be conscious of themselves as a people and to sense their unity, they became a society that took steps to ensure that their past would be a treasured

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Willard Potts, *Joyce and the Two Irelands* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), pp. 1-2.



inheritance in the present and that their memories of it would endure'.<sup>9</sup>

Tradition was such in Ireland that there also remained until the twentieth century 'the inner contradiction that seemed inseparable from the Anglo-Irish position'.<sup>10</sup> It was to this tradition that Yeats looked for inspiration in defining his own identity, to the political ideals of Swift and Burke in the eighteenth century and to the later poetry of Davis, Mangan and Ferguson in the century which followed. Although Yeats was not the only poet or literary figure to attempt to define or come to terms with the divisive nature of Irish society, he was one of the first public figures to create an organised literary movement which could give general expression to the Irish people in a rapidly changing culture and society. Seamus Deane identifies the defining moment for this programme in 1891, which Yeats confirms in his Nobel lecture 'The Irish Dramatic Movement':

The modern literature of Ireland [. . .] began when Parnell fell from power in 1891. A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics; an event was conceived; and the race began, as I think, to be troubled by that event's long gestation. Dr Hyde founded the Gaelic League, which was for many years to substitute for political argument a Gaelic grammar [. . .] Meanwhile I had begun a movement in English, in the language in which modern Ireland thinks and does its business.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J. E. Caerwyn Williams and Patrick K. Ford, *The Irish Literary Tradition* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 2: 'There is probably no other people in north-west Europe that has been longer resident in its lands than the Irish'. Thomas Cahill argues a similar case in *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> J. C. Beckett, *The Anglo-Irish Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Irish Dramatic Movement', *Autobiographies*, p. 559.

1891 was an important year for a number of reasons: the death of Parnell signalled a change in mood towards the revival of a new cultural movement, one that would rely strongly on the preservation of a monolithic Ireland. It was also the year in which Yeats founded the Irish Literary Society in London. This ultimately set in motion events leading to the formation of the National Literary Society and the Abbey Theatre, in what was to become known as the Celtic Revival.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of such movements and societies, according to Deane, was 'the redefinition of the idea of Ireland and of the Irish community and its history'.<sup>13</sup> At the time of the poet's birth in 1865, Irish culture was being questioned and romanticised. Its folklore and traditions were also being revived through the pioneering work of figures such as Samuel Ferguson and Standish O'Grady.<sup>14</sup> Yeats sought to formulate a definition of the 'Irish self' based on this heroic understanding of Ireland's past: the richness of its mythology, folklore and oral traditions, using both literary and political figures as the inspiration for the revitalisation of Irish culture. In Maud Gonne he found his perfect muse, the embodiment of the Celtic Cathleen Ni Houlihan, mercurial and unconquerable; in his friend John O'Leary he recognised the perfect balance between the man of action and the poet, heroic and romantic in temperament. But Yeats realised it was impossible to define a culture without recourse to its native language and traditions, learning from the Old Fenian that 'there is no great literature without

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<sup>12</sup> Yeats established the Irish Literary Society in Dublin in 1897 and the Abbey Theatre in 1904.

<sup>13</sup> Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson and Company Ltd, 1986), p. 142. Yeats makes this claim in 'Dramatic Personae', *Autobiographies*, p. 396.

<sup>14</sup> Ferguson's works were based on saga and legend and included *Lays of the Western Gael* (1865) and *Congal* (1872) whereas O'Grady's influential *History of Ireland: Heroic Period* followed in 1878.

nationality, no great nationality without literature'.<sup>15</sup> Yeats' vision was to create, as Douglas Hyde had sought, a unity of culture that would serve to integrate rather than divide the various political and cultural denominations in Irish society.

Joyce and Kavanagh may have shared the feeling that Yeats' mythological Ireland was 'provincial' in outlook and suspicious of the modern, when in fact it could also be argued that he was merely doing what all writers and poets do in the face of change or revolution — restoring pride to a nation by dwelling on past or 'heroic' events. He did not simply 'invent' a fictional view of a romantic Ireland; he used this as the 'model' through which to restore life, energy and prestige to a nation which had lost its sense of vitality through political and economic setbacks.<sup>16</sup> His mission was ultimately a search for the Irish self, in this case for the heart and soul of Ireland. Yeats was certainly aware of the importance of crafting an idea or image of the poet, as evinced in famous assertions such as: 'Even when the poet seems most himself [. . .] he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete'.<sup>17</sup> This would suggest a degree of structure, of developing 'a model of the nation' on the part of the literary artist to ensure the creation of great literature, but the poet must also draw upon 'individual' experience, folk history, his locality and surroundings,

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Mary Helen Thuente', *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (London: Gill and Macmillan, 1980), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Yeats himself makes the point that all artists take inspiration from 'the national character [. . .] and the national circumstances' in his essay 'Nationality and Literature' (1893), *Uncollected Prose*, ed. John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 269.

<sup>17</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'A General Introduction for my Work', cited in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), p. 379.

in order to create a more central focus: the nature of the personal self and the relationship with community.<sup>18</sup>

A similar undertaking was evident in the triumph of Shakespeare in the Elizabethan theatre, giving to the English a sense of their own culture, tradition and historic lineage in such plays as *King John* and *Henry V*. It was also portrayed in Walt Whitman's poetry in the United States or in Tennyson's Arthurian legends, evident in the haunting image of the Lady of Shallot. The truth is that all great writers, as Wilde reminds us, are guilty of creating their own myths, and Yeats' contributions were no different.<sup>19</sup> If mythology and folklore are based on idealised or imaginary concepts, at the same time they help to forge an understanding of a common identity which gives a sense of purpose and meaning to a civilisation. In this sense Yeats was responsible for defining and shaping a modern conception of Irishness.

The argument that the English 'invented the idea of Ireland' or that 'in emphasising locality' Yeats was doing the same can actually lead to a misinterpretation of the pivotal role the poet played in defining or understanding the nature of modern Irish culture.<sup>20</sup> If Kiberd contends that Yeats 'invented' a notion of Irishness which still sticks today, he is equally aware of the 'fictions' associated with all attempts at defining a 'nation', wherever they may be:

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<sup>18</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 494.

<sup>19</sup> R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life I: The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 80, cites Wilde's remark 'I think a man should invent his own myth' as having an important influence on the young Yeats when they met in 1888.

<sup>20</sup> Declan Kiberd, 'Anglo-Irish Attitudes', *Ireland's Field Day* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1983), p. 83; *Inventing Ireland*, p. 107.

“England” is an invention too, created in the endless dialectic between rulers and ruled. If the English first learned of the Irish from plays and texts, most written at many removes, many Irish equally concocted a nation of Englishness without direct exposure to the people thus “known” [. . .] It might indeed be said that there were four persons involved in every Anglo-Irish relationship: the two actual persons, and the two fictions, each one a concoction of the other’s imagination. Yet the concoction leaked into the true version, even as the truth.<sup>21</sup>

We know that notions of the ‘degenerate’ and ‘barbaric’ Celt had prevailed in English literature since the Elizabethan period. The most telling example is present in Edmund Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1633) where the poet advocates scorched earth tactics and genocide as the solution to the Irish problem. C  il  n Owens explores this sixteenth-century depiction during a visit to The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington. He draws attention to a prevailing tendency to underplay the ‘genocidal’ nature of Spenser’s writing and his role ‘in the Elizabethan conquest’ in order to promote ‘amity and collaboration’ between Ireland and England. Owens is critical of an academy which continues to paint an unreliable interpretation of the Gaelic tradition and which often overlooks the gruesome and violent reality of sixteenth-century Irish life.<sup>22</sup>

Yeats was particularly interested in challenging stereotypes associated with the Irish national character and tended not to simplify the nature of Spenser’s role in Ireland. He greatly admired the man’s poetry, but was critical of the administrator’s colonial influence in the country. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>22</sup> C  il  n Owens, ‘Nobility and Newcomers in Renaissance Ireland: A Folger Shakespeare Library Exhibition’, *Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall 2013), pp. 13-15.

describes Yeats as a poet 'of decolonization [. . .] an Irish poet with more than strictly local Irish meaning and applications [. . .] resisting imperialism — in his insistence on a new narrative for his people'.<sup>23</sup> This 'Irish poet' sought to dwell on the more positive attributes of the culture he knew. In Yeats' youth the deep-rooted Spenserian views of Ireland prevailed and were often promoted within academic circles and the media, despite some minor efforts at a reassessment of the situation in the criticism of Matthew Arnold.<sup>24</sup> In *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1866), Arnold recognised that 'positive and constructive criticism is needed' in truly understanding Irish culture, insisting that 'the forms of its language are not our only key to a people; what it says in its language, its literature, is the great key, and we must get back to literature [. . .] traces of kinship, and the more essential sort of kinship, spiritual kinship, between us and the Celt, of which we have never dreamed'.<sup>25</sup>

Yeats was also conscious that it was through 'language' that he would reach the true nature of the Irish self and that in defining such a culture he would come to a greater understanding of his own nature. In *The Celtic Element in Literature* (1897) he challenged Arnold's definition of Ireland as England's 'sentimental' opposite 'always ready to react against the despotism of fact', overturning that age-old irrational and mercurial image of the wild Irishman and transforming it into a new

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<sup>23</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 280-281.

<sup>24</sup> Consider the racist views about the Irish which circulated in the London *Times*, in Cruickshank's illustrations in *Punch* and even within government circles. In 1836 the British Prime-Minister Benjamin Disraeli described the Irish as a 'wild, reckless, indolent, uncertain and superstitious race [who] have no sympathy with the English character,' quoted in L.P. Curtis' *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (Bridgeport, CT: University of Bridgeport, 1968), p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Arnold, *The Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder, 1891), pp. 69-70.

and potent imaginative symbol, steeped in ancient Irish folk traditions.<sup>26</sup> In Yeats' view Ireland had a culture and national spirit equal to any in Europe and it was his intention to revitalise this 'self-image' at a national level, renewing a forgotten literary culture through the creation of a literature which would now be distinctively 'Irish in spirit from being English in language'.<sup>27</sup> The various theatrical productions in English which Yeats and Lady Gregory (among others) initiated in Dublin from the late 1890s became in effect the defining language of a new society and a way of expressing Irish identity. The plays performed in the Abbey Theatre dramatized not only themes of romance and heroism associated with the Irish but also their capacity for violence and insurrection, witnessed firstly in angry reactions to events in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907. (It was also in some respects evident in the chaos which followed the revolutionary period.) The quarrel between public opinion and Yeats' theatre reached further climax in 1926 during the controversial riots involving O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*.

In nearly all of the Abbey performances the intention was to explore what being Irish actually meant, not merely to espouse the romance of heroic mythologies, as both the language of Synge's and O'Casey's plays effectively illustrate. Whether audiences reacted aggressively to the sexual undercurrent denoted in the drama more than the outright portrayal of violence is still questionable, though it is often recorded that Synge's allusion to 'shifts' sparked The Playboy Riots and that

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>27</sup> Yeats, *Uncollected Prose*, ed. John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 255.

O'Casey was suggesting that Irish people were more interested in sex and materialism than they were in preserving the heart and soul of Ireland.<sup>28</sup>

Yeats defended both Synge and O'Casey because he knew that they were making an important point about the nature of their society, although the extent to which the plays really defined Irishness is debatable. Daniel Corkery did not believe that Yeats' theatre represented an authentic Irish identity. He argued that 'a national literature is written primarily for its own people' and that the Anglo-Irish literature produced by Yeats and the Irish Literary Movement did not present 'a normal literature' because 'it was the product of Irishmen who neither live at home nor write primarily for their own people'.<sup>29</sup> He made an exception for J.M. Synge because the playwright chose to learn Irish and because 'he went into the huts of the people and lived with them'.<sup>30</sup> Heather Laird argues that in works such *The Hidden Ireland* (1924) and *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931), Corkery is reacting against the colonial nature of Ascendancy writers by 'constructing an alternative narrative of a cultural past' in Irish society, one which effectively recognises the primary influence of the Gaelic tradition.<sup>31</sup>

What has sometimes been erroneously stated is that Yeats alone was single-handedly promoting an Anglo-Irish Protestant tradition over a distinctly Catholic

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<sup>28</sup> This is demonstrated through Bessie Burgess' audacious presumption before her Catholic audience during the first performance of *The Plough and the Stars* that 'General Clitheroe'd rather be unlacin' his wife's bodice than standin' at a barricade', Sean O'Casey, *Three Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 165.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1966), pp. 2-27.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Daniel Corkery's Cultural Criticism: Selected Writings* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), p. 6.



one, when it was clear even in the early literary efforts that his intentions extended far beyond one particular social or ethnic group. This fact was outlined publicly by the poet and his fellow players in 1897, when they declared in writing: 'We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery or easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us'.<sup>32</sup>

The reference to the 'Irish people' as 'weary of misrepresentation' is most interesting as Yeats is positively suggesting that it is his mission (and the purpose of the Irish Literary Movement) to set the record straight, resolving the various political divisions through unity of culture. The irony is that many agreed with Corkery's argument and saw in Yeats' Celtic revival not 'the home of ancient idealism' but a clear 'misrepresentation' of Irish identity, based either on fiction and romance or on a particular Anglo-Irish or English agenda. Yeats was certainly conscious of the linguistic paradox in his own complex identity, realising that 'Gaelic' was his 'national language' but not his 'mother tongue', and so in order to reach what he believed was a sincere and historic link to the Irish psyche, to what he considered to be an authentic definition of the Irish self, he relied on translations of Gaelic literature and on effectively reviving the myths, legends and folklore of Ireland to

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<sup>32</sup> This quotation is from a letter, written by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn in 1897, cited in Emer Nolan's *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 25.

initiate the first comprehensive effort at defining Irish culture in English.<sup>33</sup> Although folklore became one of the main focuses for the revival of nationality and literature throughout the 1890s, many argue that Yeats did not intend to encourage the violent patriotic fervour which followed; instead he saw in his materials 'the scattered fragments of a lost religion' which he could use to introduce a new understanding of Irish identity and the self.<sup>34</sup> Deborah Fleming strongly supports this view, suggesting that Yeats' aim was to use this 'folkloristic and mythic heritage in order to influence the development of a new national culture'.<sup>35</sup> She highlights both Yeats and Synge as key contributors towards the establishment of 'a new cultural and linguistic identity in Ireland', which would ultimately 'reacquaint the Irish people with their lost culture, to restore to Ireland its sense of national unity through literature'.<sup>36</sup>

Critics remain divided over Yeats' precise motives. Mary Helen Thuente emphasises his interest in folklore (throughout the 1880s and 1890s) as the main driving force behind the formation of the Irish Literary Renaissance, whereas James Pethica considers Yeats' desire to reject 'Victorian rationalism in favour of Romantic forms of knowledge' and views him as an 'Irish writer' who asserts 'the

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<sup>33</sup> Yeats' own words in 'A General Introduction for My Work': 'Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue', quoted in *The Major Works*, p. 385.

<sup>34</sup> 'Yeats was seeking deliberately [. . .] a mythology to nourish his poetry, to bind him to Ireland. He became self-consciously an *Irish* poet. Anglo-American critics often underestimate how Irish he was . . . [He viewed the old legends and folklore] as the scattered fragments of a lost religion', Peter Costello, *The Heart Grown Brutal: The Irish Revolution in Literature, from Parnell to the Death of Yeats, 1891-1939* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> Deborah Fleming, *A Man Who Does Not Exist: The Irish Peasant in the Work of W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge* (Chicago: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

distinctiveness of 'Irishness' as a cultural identity'.<sup>37</sup> During a speech in New York in 1904, for example, Yeats outlines his vision for an Ireland directly connected to an ancient heritage, separate from the materialism of the present and drawing upon the essential conflict of ideas between an industrialised England and a more agrarian Celtic society, stating: 'We wish to preserve an ancient ideal of life. Wherever its customs prevail, there you will find the folk song, the folk tale, the proverb and the charming manners that come from an ancient culture [. . .] the ideals of a great time when they sang the heroic life'.<sup>38</sup>

Yeats' conflict with community was rooted in the critique of a materialistic and philistine Irish society which he viewed as a threat to the preservation of this 'ancient ideal of life', to his personal 'Dream of the noble and the beggarman'.<sup>39</sup> Yet the political questions that divided the nation also weighed heavily on his mind, in the same way that they had done for Hyde in 1892.<sup>40</sup> How to marry the intellectual forces of cultural nationalism with the increasing physical force nationalism of later decades was a primary concern for every public man of letters. Yeats seemed at

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<sup>37</sup> Mary Helen Thuente emphasises the significance of folklore as 'distinct' from mythology in 'Yeats' literary development in her work *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1980), p. 2. James Pethica, 'Yeats, folklore, and Irish legend', ed. Majorie Howes, *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 129.

<sup>38</sup> Yeats' Wolfe Tone lecture, New York, 1904, quoted in Richard Ellmann's *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), pp. 116-117.

<sup>39</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Municipal Gallery Re-visited', *The Major Works*, p. 164.

<sup>40</sup> In his famous address before the Irish National Literary Society on 25 November 1892 entitled 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland', Douglas Hyde spoke of the complexity of an Irish culture which sits in a 'half-way house' – longing 'for recognition as a distinct nationality, and at the same time throws away with both hands what would make it so', see <http://www.gaeilge.org/deanglicising.html> [accessed 13th March 2014].

times divided. During the Wolfe Tone centenary celebrations of 1898 he invokes a revolutionary spirit in the Irish character, expressing hatred of 'the ideals and ambitions of England, [its] materialisms', believing that 'Ireland is coming to her own and better self. She is turning to the great men of the past — to Emmet and Wolfe Tone, to Grattan and Burke, to Davis and to Mitchel, and asking their guidance'.<sup>41</sup> Here he outlines the ideals of a revolutionary nationalism, viewing Irish identity in terms of a collective or unified self. In other moments, there is a sense of doubt in Yeats' mind, a divided inner self, reflecting the uncertain nature of his countrymen. Some years later, for example, when he confronts the revolutionary ideals of Connolly and Pearse in 'Man and the Echo', he broods with a sense of shame and inner turmoil on the question of his own personal part in the conflict, pondering: 'Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot'? <sup>42</sup> There is always a sense of ambivalence in Yeats' poetry which denotes the paradox of the Irish political situation. He tries to find the answer through compromise and by coming to terms with the complex nature of Irish identity, insisting:

All Irish writers have to decide whether they will write as the upper classes have done, not to express but to exploit this country or join the intellectual movement [. . .] for the most part a writer or public man of the upper classes is useless to this country till he has done something that separates him from his class.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Yeats delivered this speech at a Wolfe Tone Banquet in London on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1898, quoted in *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, Vol II: 1896-1900, ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly and Deirdre Toomey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 702-703.

<sup>42</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, p. 178.

<sup>43</sup> W. B. Yeats wrote this in *Samhain* in October 1901, quoted in *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 124.

What made Yeats' case unique was the obvious struggle within his own nature: he could not reconcile himself to the fact that he lived a hybrid existence in a nation which saw him as distinctly English in outlook, whilst he harboured Irish sentiments and ideals. Thomas Kinsella supports this viewpoint when he argues that Yeats was part of a 'dual tradition, the outcome of colonial upset and adjustment [. . .] a poet of Irish background addressing an English audience on personal and Irish matters'.<sup>44</sup> It is ironic that despite this paradox he was to become one of the founding fathers of modern Irish identity in efforts to bring his country and culture to the attention of the world. There was no question in his mind that such a culture did exist and that it was his mission to give definition to it through poetry, as he would later outline in what was to become one of his finest late poems, 'Under Ben Bulbin':

Cast your mind on other days  
That we in coming days may be  
Still the indomitable Irishry.<sup>45</sup>

What constitutes the 'we' in Yeats' estimation may be a matter of considerable debate. Is he referring merely to his own personal Anglo-Irish identity or to the nature of all Irish people? The poet's attachment to Anglo-Ireland was made clear during the debate on divorce which took place in the Irish Senate on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1925, when he described his Protestant ancestors as 'no petty people', and proudly

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition: An Essay on Poetry and Politics in Ireland* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1995), p. 64.

<sup>45</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, p. 168.

declared himself 'a typical man of that minority'.<sup>46</sup> And yet he was vehemently attached to an Ireland which was Celtic in nature, exploring its folklore and traditions and avowing that he wished 'to see the country Irish speaking'.<sup>47</sup> This gives rise to the central contradiction within the poet's mind: how to express through poetry the distinctive quarrel with oneself and others.

It is clear that Yeats' writing incorporates both the personal inner identity of the poet and the wider preoccupations of Irish society as a whole; in doing so he becomes an iconic public figure who influences other artists to share and elaborate on a wider and more pluralistic expression of the self in Irish literature. His poetry epitomises the essential quarrel between self and community, a struggle deep within the mind of the artist, as Richard Ellmann (one of Yeats' first biographers) explains:

He [Yeats] spent much of his life attempting to understand the deep contradictions within his mind and was perhaps most alive to that which separated the man of action lost in reverie from the man of reverie who could not quite find himself in action [. . .] Afraid of insincerity, he struggled unsuccessfully to fuse or to separate the several characters by whom he felt himself to be peopled.<sup>48</sup>

Yeats enters into the 'abyss of himself' because poetry is a way of discovering the truth about his own nature and of coming to terms with the conflict prevalent in the society around him. Ellmann informs us that 'He must speak for his generation as well as for himself, and reveal the truth about both'.<sup>49</sup> Terence Brown elaborates:

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<sup>46</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Senate Speeches: From the Debate on Divorce', *The Major Works*, p. 450.

<sup>47</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Senate Speeches: The Irish Language, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1923', *The Major Works*, p. 448.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-6.

‘Yeats pondered how that battle within the self, through the mask, could be made the basis both of a dramatically charged poetic and of dramaturgy’.<sup>50</sup>

According to Brown, it was in 1901, during Yeats’ visit to Stratford to view Shakespeare’s History plays, that the poet formulated his most coherent views on the projection of the self within literature. Here he realised the secret to Shakespeare’s timeless universality: the fact that within his plays he ‘poses character against character’, creating as Harold Bloom would have it, ‘so many separate selves’, an antithetical interpretation of art which allowed him (as an artist) to be viewed as both ‘Everything and Nothing’, the perfect antithesis.<sup>51</sup> Brown explains:

Even in 1901, the problem of the self and its public representation had not been far from his mind as he brooded on what he had seen in the Stratford theatre. There he had recalled a Balzac novel, *La Peau de chagrin*, that explores the conflict between ‘a true self’ and the momentary self which acts and lives in the world, and is subject to the judgement of the world. By the end of the decade he had become less attached to the notion of a ‘true self’ as more and more he sought to express what he called ‘the personality as a whole’ [. . .] It may have been at Stratford that some of the seeds of this recognition were sown: that the struggle to put the ‘very self’ into art was futile.<sup>52</sup>

Yeats had previously been influenced by Oscar Wilde’s views on the nature of the critic and the artist, that ‘it is only in contact with the art of foreign nations that the

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<sup>50</sup> Terence Brown, ‘Shakespeare and the Irish Self’, *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 67.

<sup>51</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd, 1999), p. 1. Yeats explains his early preoccupation with Hamlet’s character, illustrating the struggle with his own nature from an early age: ‘For many years Hamlet was an image of heroic self-possession for the poses of youth and childhood to copy, a combatant of the battle within myself’, *Autobiographies*, p. 47.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism*, p. 67.

art of a country gains that individual and separate life that we call nationality'.<sup>53</sup> Now in England he suddenly became conscious of a perfect sense of opposites, a juxtaposition that could be used to define and understand the poet's inner nature and the spirit of the Irish nation itself. Ireland could be defined simply in terms of what it was not; the gross materialism of industrial centres such as England would now become the perfect foil to an idealised romantic Galway or Sligo. The battle within the self could be defined ultimately through the writer's distinctive style, in this case in the Wildean mask, which Yeats refers to as 'an emotional antithesis to all that comes out of [. . .] internal nature', most effectively illustrated in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917), where he defines the 'anti-self' as 'The other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, [which] comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality'.<sup>54</sup>

The realisation came to the poet after struggling furiously to write a play he had been planning for some time. After a five year period of imaginative 'sterility', Yeats tells us that he finally learned to 'mock in a comedy [his] own thought', recalling:

I was always thinking of the element of imitation in style and in life, and of the life beyond heroic imitation. [. . .] all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask or some other life, on a re-birth as something not one's self, something created in a moment and perpetually renewed; in playing a game like that of a child where one loses the infinite pain of self-realisation, in a grotesque or solemn painted face put on that one may hide from the terror of judgement [. . .] 'If we cannot imagine ourselves as different

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<sup>53</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 373.

<sup>54</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 189; 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works*, p. 412.



from what we are, and try to assume a second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves though we may accept one from others'.<sup>55</sup>

The focus which Yeats places on renewal here is interesting and it is something that recurs in his mind throughout his entire literary career. How is it possible for the artist to express his true self in the poem or work of fiction without resisting failure or 'insincerity'? For Yeats and the many artists who followed him (notably writers like Joyce and McGahern), self-expression could only be worked through some form of 'artifice' or 'refined' construct which effectively ensured 'a perpetually renewed' sense of individual identity.<sup>56</sup> In a late poem, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', we find Yeats struggling to 'enumerate old themes' before he is willing to accept that age-old reliance on the 'heart'. It would seem here that despite insistence on the antithetical (the opposite aspects of art, life and nature) the poet cannot fully suppress the personal within and there is always a feeling that through the expression of 'the anti-self' he is actually defining his true and hidden identity. In 'Dramatis Personae' (1896-1902) he describes Lady Gregory's last years as being characterised by moments 'when speaking in her own character, she seemed always her greater self,' and then immediately suggests the need for an opposite: that 'A writer must die every day he lives, be reborn, as it is said in the Burial Service, an

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<sup>55</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', *The Major Works*, p. 413.

<sup>56</sup> Yeats' ideas on happiness and role play as ways of offering insight into the nature of the self are particularly relevant to the fiction of McGahern, for example in the author's final novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), which illustrates the lasting influence of Yeats' poetry on modern Irish writing.

incorruptible self, that self [the] opposite of all he has named as 'himself'.<sup>57</sup> Is Yeats suggesting that the aim of the great writer (epitomised in the form of Gregory) is to talk in his or her own person, ultimately resolving the conflicting nature of the 'anti-self'? What is certain is that his emphasis is on style, something he believes is the surest way to find sincerity in the work of art.<sup>58</sup> In *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903) he asserts his connection to Irish culture and experience: 'I could not write of any country but Ireland, for my style has been shaped by the subjects I have worked on [. . .] I might have found more of Ireland if I had written in Irish, but I found a little, and I have found all myself'.<sup>59</sup>

The 'anti-self' is both an idea and a method which Yeats employs in order to come to terms with the conflict with his community, his sense of displacement and the growing insecurity he feels in connection with the Anglo-Irish tradition in the face of an ambitious and power-hungry Irish middle class. His fears are brought to the surface of his poetry in the Dublin lockout of 1913 when, observing his society from a distance, he can sense only the greed, philistinism and gombeen mentality of his fellow men, as he declares in the opening lines of 'September 1913':

What need you, being come to sense,  
But fumble in a greasy till  
And add the halfpence to the pence  
And prayer to shivering prayer, until

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<sup>57</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 457.

<sup>58</sup> Declan Kiberd remarks: 'the Keatsian and Wildean self, though conceived as a theatrical search for an enabling style, became the surest basis for intelligent self-scrutiny. Style rather than sincerity was the important thing, since style bespoke authenticity,' *Inventing Ireland*, p. 123.

<sup>59</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), p. 329. Yeats advocates here: 'now I think my style is myself'.

You have dried the marrow from the bone; [. . .]  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.<sup>60</sup>

This poem presents the perfect antithesis to the 'romantic' languorous rhythms of Yeats' early period and it also explores the poet's frustrations about a contemporary Ireland which appears as an affront to the heroic idealism of the past. Yeats juxtaposes the greed and materialism of middle-class Ireland with the heroic actions of Irish revolutionaries such as Robert Emmet, Edward Fitzgerald and Wolfe Tone, creating a perfect antithesis. What we are seeing is the poet's shift in style and mood to a deeper and more critical interpretation of his people, to a language which can ultimately express a modern Ireland fraught with domestic and civil disobedience.

In 'Sept 1913' Yeats comments upon real people and events, and the focus is not so much on a personal 'romantic self' as upon the collective nation as a whole, an assessment of the Irish people. In 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931' he later describes himself as one of 'the last Romantics' who 'chose for theme/Traditional sanctity and loveliness'.<sup>61</sup> Although Yeats is certainly influenced by English Romantics such as Blake and Keats, in these particular lines he is lamenting the decline of his own ancestral Anglo-Irish tradition. He equates the spirit of the English Romantics with his own artistic soul, that universal feeling that art is an essential 'quarrel' with the self. During his life the poet struggles to define how his own nature and hybrid identity fits into the complexity which is modern Ireland, in the face of its abject

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<sup>60</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'September 1913', *The Major Works*, p. 51.

<sup>61</sup> Yeats, 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931', *The Major Works*, p. 128.

violence and political turmoil, and so the dilemma is clearly rooted in the tensions of personal experience within a particular community. In later life he is crippled with doubt about the perils of old age in the image of 'a comfortable kind of old scarecrow' and longs to find his true poetic style and voice by again withering 'into the truth'.<sup>62</sup> This inner struggle is nonetheless a return to an earlier and more passionate expression within the 'deep heart's core'.<sup>63</sup> In this sense, it could be argued that the birth of the modern Irish self in Yeatsian terms and experience is expressed in the opening lines of his most memorable early poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', a defining moment in the poet's life and career. Disillusioned and alone on the streets of London in 1890, Yeats looks into a small fountain in a shop window and longs to return to his native rural Ireland, best illustrated in the final stanza:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake waters lapping with low sounds by the shore  
While I stand on the roadway on the pavements grey  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.<sup>64</sup>

Where some historians have viewed culture in Ireland as an 'an agent of anarchy rather than of unity', in this poem Yeats sought to challenge the stereotypical notion that a divisive Irish culture was doomed to failure.<sup>65</sup> In his dreamy and somewhat exotic image of Innisfree he is characterising the uniqueness of the Irish landscape as something distinct and apart: antithetical to the English culture that sought to define

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<sup>62</sup> Yeats, 'Among School Children'; 'The Coming of Wisdom with Time', p. 114; p. 43, *The Major Works*.

<sup>63</sup> The final lines of Yeats's poem 'The Lake of Innisfree' are never forgotten by the poet and are echoed again and again in later poems.

<sup>64</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, p. 20.

<sup>65</sup> F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland: 1890-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 2.

its fragility. There is also something deeply personal about this poem which denotes more than the expression of an Irish setting: Yeats has found his own distinctive style and voice, the perfect harmony between the inner self and the outer tranquillity of the Irish landscape, so that in expressing it, he somehow expresses himself. The poet and the nation here become interdependent in the forging of a particular style and setting. The Irish self for Yeats must be defined by the landscape, in the connection between man and nature, between tradition and modernity, art and the common man, all of which are to be viewed in reaction against greed and materialism.

Yeats' vision has important repercussions for Irish culture and society, particularly for later poets such as Patrick Kavanagh, who will struggle to come to terms with what he considers to be a fictional Ireland that has been 'invented and patented by Yeats' into some form of 'spiritual entity', and he is determined to offer an alternative view of the peasant in society.<sup>66</sup> Kavanagh's poems, though often viewed in contrast to Yeats', also recognise the interdependence of man and nature and the need to escape the restrictions of the present before 'the magic of the fields would be disturbed in [his] imagination'.<sup>67</sup> He is always conscious of the Yeats legacy and his poetry is a response to it, something which is further developed by writers like Liam O'Flaherty through the presentation of Gypo Nolan in *The Informer* (1925), a man of violence who longs to escape the tensions of city life by returning to

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<sup>66</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Prose* (Worcester and London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), pp. 14-15.

<sup>67</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn* (London: Penguin edition, 1978), p. 187.

the wilderness and tranquillity of his native Connemara.

Yeats' influence crosses the generations, inspiring contemporary writers and poets, notably Seamus Heaney, through insistence on 'his own language, his own vision, his own terms of reference', for example in the Derry poet's creation of a cultural centre or *omphalos* in his native townland of Mossbawn.<sup>68</sup> Heaney expresses a certain 'continuity' which was initiated in the literature of Yeats, a poetry which becomes a 'revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself'.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, in the novels of John McGahern, we recognise that Yeatsian tension between traditional rural settings and the influence of the modern world, centres which are used as a kind of microcosm for Irish life, a landscape for the expression of paternal and patriarchal authority over the family unit, evident in modern works such as *Amongst Women* (1990). It is thus my contention, contrary to popular belief, that in poems such as 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' Yeats actually achieves that unity of vision and culture which he desired throughout his life and career, both inspiring and challenging other writers to respond critically to the 'revivalist agenda', whilst establishing his own personally marginalised status within a particular ancestral tradition. Yeats effectively romanticised and restored belief in a cultural heritage which could be used to ensure growth and continuity in the present. He had a lasting impact on all the Irish writers who followed him, particularly Joyce, who conveys

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<sup>68</sup> 'I admire the way that Yeats took on the world on his own terms [. . .] his own language, his own vision, his own terms of reference,' Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), p. 101. Heaney also acknowledges in his essay 'The Sense of Place' that Yeats' Celtic Twilight 'was the beginning of a discovery of confidence in our own ground, in our place, in our speech, English and Irish', p. 135.

<sup>69</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, p. 41.

the most original literary insight into the nature and psychology of the self since Shakespeare.

### **Yeats and Joyce: culture's "deepest self"**

In the memorable Field Day pamphlet *Heroic Styles: the tradition of an idea* Seamus Deane reminds us of the two dominant traditions prevalent in Irish literature and culture: the Yeatsian, romantic tradition which relies upon a mythical ancient heritage for cultural definition, and the Joycean tendency to embrace modern culture by escaping into 'the pluralism of the present'.<sup>70</sup> The liberating argument of Deane's pamphlet is that interpretations of culture in Ireland need to be "re-read" or revised to ensure cultural stability in the present.<sup>71</sup> This is perhaps for the more obvious reasons that Joyce maintains, the fact that our 'civilisation is an immense woven fabric in which very different elements are mixed [. . .] In such a fabric, it is pointless searching for a thread that has remained pure, virgin and uninfluenced by other threads nearby'.<sup>72</sup> Thomas Kinsella identifies Joyce's liberal or open approach to Irish

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<sup>70</sup> Seamus Deane, *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea*, selected from *Ireland's Field Day: Field Day Theatre Company* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1985), p. 45.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>72</sup> James Joyce, 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages', *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 118.

cultural identity, in response to Yeats' apparently insular interpretation, despite the problematic nature of both writers' positions.<sup>73</sup> Alistair Cormack explains:

The opposition of Yeats and Joyce is one part of the seemingly intractable legacy of colonialism. We may be able to see through the 'spiritual heroics — or indeed the pathology of literary unionism' — represented by Yeats, but at the same time the desire, represented for many by Joyce, to skip merrily into a new world beyond the mystique of national identity may simply be an imaginary and overhasty solution to real political problems.<sup>74</sup>

The suggestion is that the positions held by both Yeats and Joyce can lead to restrictive forms of allegiance, developing either into a pluralistic view of culture and society or a more narrow form of tribalism, which later transpired during the Northern Irish 'Troubles'. Where some modern critics recognise Yeats' allegiance as 'self-appointed spokesman for the dwindling Anglo-Irish Protestant population', others equally form 'a clear consensus about Joyce's active hostility towards colonialism', with a similar tendency to accept the author's deep preoccupation with Irish cultural and political affairs.<sup>75</sup> It would appear that Joyce was just as interested in cultural nationalism as Yeats, and equally concerned with controversial issues relating to race, empire and personal identity. Andrew Gibson views Joyce's art as a form of 'Celtic revenge' on English colonialism, and a response to 'manifold aspects

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<sup>73</sup> 'Yeats stands for the Irish tradition as broken, and Joyce stands for it as healed - or healing - from its mutilation', Thomas Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition: An Essay on Poetry and Politics in Ireland*, p. 91.

<sup>74</sup> Alistair Cormack, *Yeats and Joyce: Cyclical History and the Reprobate Tradition* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2008), p. 18.

<sup>75</sup> Yeats sought 'to invent a history and an identity which would guarantee Anglo-Irish inclusion in, if not domination of, a restored Irish nation', Gerry Smyth, *Decolonization and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 73; Joseph Brooker, *Joyce's Critics: Transitions in Reading and Culture* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 229.



of Irish life', both culturally and politically.<sup>76</sup> In a significant lecture delivered in Trieste in 1907, Joyce voiced his concerns, mainly on the grounds of Ireland's turbulent and treacherous history, that any Irish subject should consider changing 'his position from detached observer to convinced nationalist'.<sup>77</sup> He also outlined in the same lecture his distaste for colonial rule and imperialism, insisting:

If an observer, thoroughly convinced that Ireland was a body lacerated by ferocious struggles in the days of Henry II, and a filthily corrupt body in the days of William Pitt, were to deduce from this conviction that England, neither now nor in the future, has no debts to render in Ireland, he would be mistaken and greatly so. If a victorious country tyrannises over another, it cannot logically take it amiss if the latter reacts. Men are made that way: and no one, unless he were blinded by self-interest or ingenuity, can still believe that a colonizing country is prompted by purely Christian motives [. . .] If the Irish have not been able to do what their American brothers did, this does not mean that that they will never do so.<sup>78</sup>

One might deduce from Joyce's lecture that nationalism and British imperialism have their own agendas and one is merely the extension of the other.<sup>79</sup> The greater irony is that less than ten years after he delivered these words, Ireland was to witness the Easter Rising, the first major attempt to overthrow British rule in the country since 1867. Given the context, Joyce's words appear to be alarmingly prophetic suggesting that he clearly understood Irish history and politics and that he

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<sup>76</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 1; *The Strong Spirit: History, Politics and Aesthetics in the Writings of James Joyce, 1898-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Joyce, 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages', p. 116.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Seamus Deane asserts this view in his essay 'Joyce the Irishman', ed. Derek Attridge, *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 35. Such arguments have been put forward by various political figures and writers who followed Joyce: George Orwell, Nelson Mandela, and Noam Chomsky.

was committed to defining the nature of the Irish self. What is also worth noting is that in his lecture Joyce is making a public proclamation about the nature of Anglo-Irish relations and the determination of the Irish for self-government at a time when the country was still being controlled by politicians in Westminster. He is, like Yeats, deeply interested in making sense of the identity and national aspirations of his fellow countrymen.

Emer Nolan's *James Joyce and Nationalism* (1995) reminds us that the writer 'welcomed that modernity which Yeats feared', and also highlights the danger of seeing Joyce simply from the point of view of a cosmopolitan exile, disengaged from the Irish scene.<sup>80</sup> Early critics such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot advocated the opposite case, envisaging him as predominantly modernist in outlook and beyond the prejudices of language and religion, far removed from Ireland and its politics. Nolan suggests that such claims ignore the evident tensions between nationalism and modernism which remain unresolved in Joyce's work. Frank Shovlin's more recent study *Journey Westward* (2012) places *Dubliners* in the context of links to the West of Ireland as a place of imaginative freedom and creativity. Here the author's coded references to family history and more implicit allusions in response to Yeats, Lady Gregory and the legacy of the Revival are revealed.<sup>81</sup> Joyce and the Revivalist

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<sup>80</sup> Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism*, pp. 1-23.

<sup>81</sup> 'One of the earliest critical mentions of Joyce wishes to connect him not so much with Dublin but with the west', Frank Shovlin, *Journey Westward: Joyce, Dubliners and the Literary Revival* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 1.

writers remain separated, however, in connection with a distinctive individual style and cultural tradition, as Deane confirms:

Whatever we may think of their ideas of tradition, we still adhere to the tradition of an idea that art and revolution are definitively associated in their production of an individual style which is also the signature of the community's deepest self. The fascination with style has its roots in a tradition of opposition to official discourse, but, as we have seen, it leads to that vacillation between the extremes of picturesque caricature and tragic heroism which marks Irish literature and politics in the period since the Union.<sup>82</sup>

By 'community' Deane is referring to whichever side of the political divide the reader is associated. This has wider implications for the conflict in Northern Ireland which is very much alive at the time he is writing. Deane is arguing that both Yeats and Joyce 'adhere to' a tradition which is connected to a particular community's interpretation of itself, whether this community is imagined or not. The 'individual style' of the writer is rooted within a political framework and context which is often in 'opposition to official discourse'. We find this explicitly in both the language of Yeats' poems and Joyce's fiction. Take, for instance, two celebrated quotations from each writer:

For England may keep faith  
For all that is done and said (Yeats, 'Easter 1916').

You talk to me of nationality, language and religion.  
I shall try to fly by those nets (Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*).

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<sup>82</sup> Deane, *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea*, pp. 52-53.

Contextually, Yeats' poem and Joyce's novel are in stark contrast and yet the protest is similar — it is a call for either political or intellectual liberation within a specific cultural framework. Yeats' poem is concerned with the violence and politics of change, whereas Joyce's character, Stephen Dedalus, aspires to free himself from the political and religious chains of his upbringing and longs for spiritual liberation in the work of art. The fundamental difference is in the presentation of the subject which each writer is seeking to define. Due to the complex nature of Irish culture and society, the 'individual style' developed by Yeats and Joyce is inevitably shaped by tradition and history which in Ireland tends to be either Catholic or Protestant, the obvious religious distinction between each writer. Yeats fails to escape from his apparent Englishness in the eyes of the Irish, and Joyce cannot disguise his Catholic upbringing and tradition from the Anglo-Irish or the English observer. Both writers inevitably define Ireland's complex dual identity in terms of both class and religion, expressing the views and emotional concerns of a specific cultural group or of an individual within a particular community. Viewed in this light, their literature embodies the Irish community's sense of its 'deepest self'.

Let us consider Yeats' poem 'Easter 1916' where he gives expression to the feelings of fanatical nationalists who have become 'Enchanted to a stone' through what the poet views as "heroic idealism" in the face of blood sacrifice and violence. The judgement is essentially from the point of view of a man who is artistically and intellectually removed from the extremist politics of the rebels. His poetry reflects

both the 'terrible beauty' of a newly formed nation and encapsulates the deep contradictions within the mind of the aspiring artist and the Irish people. He admires the romantic idealism of 'McDonagh, MacBride/And Connolly and Pearse', but his deeper affiliation to the Anglo-Irish tradition cannot fully accept the perpetrators' abject violence. His natural inclination, like many of his people, is to express shock and fear at the conscious overturning of traditional law and order witnessed prolifically during Easter week. Yeats is, after all, a member of the Protestant Ascendancy and is likely to shudder at the prospect of a rising middle-class around him. Joyce, by contrast, is from a middle-class Catholic upbringing, a cultural group which was to a large extent responsible for the political revolution, although he has chosen to physically and spiritually distance himself from the conflict and its extreme nationalism. He is haunted by Irish affairs and refers constantly in his correspondence to the nature of life in his home country, particularly in relation to forms of political manipulation or betrayal within the tribe. He is also drawn to the dramatic altercations and literary disputes prevalent in Ireland, as his letters to Stanislaus during the infamous 'Playboy Riots' suggest.

What is clear is that each writer is searching for self-definition, the expression of an inner truth which often forces him to question or relate the personal life of the individual to the traditions, mythologies and frustrations of his culture. This explains why Yeats' poetry fuses the beauty and harmony of the Irish landscape, the significance of romantic love, folklore, friendships and established cultural traditions, with the brutality and violence within the state. He is determined to give

expression to a culture that has never really been formally defined and so he looks to the past as a source for his inspiration, as a way of effectively coming to terms with what is meant by the self in Irish culture and society. He finds an answer in the memory and folklore of Ireland's cultural and literary heritage, reflecting in the early poem 'To Ireland in the Coming Times' that he will become 'brother of a company' of bards ('Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,') 'That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong'.<sup>83</sup> In doing so he is forging a modern conception of Irish identity which is rooted in history and tradition, allowing the Irish people to see themselves as part of one unified culture. As this poem suggests, the poet is at the centre of this identity ('I cast my heart into my rhymes'), but it is a life which incorporates Ireland in its many aspects: past, present and future ('in the dim coming times'), and defines the contradictions prevalent within the soul of the artist, whilst also brooding upon the essential conflict with community. This is best expressed through a sincerity of style, as he will later declare in 1910:

I have no sympathy with the mid-Victorian thought to which Tennyson gave his support, that a poet's life concerns nobody but himself. A poet is by the very nature of things a man who lives with entire sincerity, or rather, the better his poetry the more sincere his life. His life is an experiment in living and those that come after have a right to know it.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Yeats, *The Major Works*, p. 25.

<sup>84</sup> In this lecture of 1910 Yeats was not content to define the poet's role as an essential preoccupation with himself alone; rather it was essential to argue 'that the lyric poet's life should be known, that we should understand that his poetry is no rootless flower, but the speech of a man [longing to give his life] to the criticism of the world', quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and The Masks*, p. 5.

Joyce is also preoccupied with 'entire sincerity' through a particular mastery of style, harbouring a similar conflict within: in his case the battle with the religious and social forces in Ireland. There also seems to be a greater effort on his part not merely to define the nature of his political world, but also to liberate the individual from it, so as to create a perfect harmony in the work of art. Joyce's writing differs from Yeats in this respect: he was not afraid to examine the bits and pieces of everyday experience, however uncomfortable they seemed. The initial resistance to his writing in Ireland and abroad was born primarily out of a squeamish reluctance to accept human nature in its many forms, whether in the probing of human sexuality or in the increasing flexibility of his style and thought. More than any other writer of his generation, Joyce creates a recognisable portrait of Irish identity as something to be celebrated not only at a local level, but in universal terms. In exile he describes his mission as twofold: to 'Europeanise Ireland' and to 'Hibernicise Europe'.<sup>85</sup> He formulates a world vision which can be read by any person in any place, striking a common chord with the individual reader, evident in the opening description of the protagonist of *Ulysses*: 'Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencod's roes'.<sup>86</sup>

Bloom's portrait is that of an ordinary individual in a kitchen, who goes about his daily and banal existence eating and thinking, looking after his cat and

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<sup>85</sup> Richard Kearney claims that Joyce wrote this after several months in exile. See 'Myth and Motherland', *Ireland's Field Day: Field Day Theatre Company*, p. 73.

<sup>86</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Declan Kiberd (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 65.

fantasising about his innermost desires.<sup>87</sup> The scene is set in Ireland and is therefore exploring the nature of Irish identity and culture (at least in Dublin) and yet it could equally be attributed to the modern man or woman in any culture today. The accomplishment seems simple and at the same time remarkable because of the vastness of the artistic enterprise: the shifting psychological and narrative styles which permeate the masterpiece which is *Ulysses*. The novel is clearly Joyce's most significant work because the central focus is individual identity and what can be defined essentially as the nature of the self both in Ireland and abroad. The finest evidence appears in the Cyclops episode when Bloom is debating the issue of nationality with the other citizens in Barney Kiernan's pub. He describes the history of the world as being defined by 'a national hatred among nations', after which the following conversation is heard:

- But do you know what a nation means? says John Wyse.
- Yes, says Bloom.
- What is it? says John Wyse.
- A Nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place . . . So of course everyone had a laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to muck out of it:
- Or also living in different places . . .
- What is your nation if I may ask, says the citizen.
- Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland.
- The citizen said nothing only cleared the spit out of his gullet . . .<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> In his biography of Joyce, Richard Ellmann asserts: 'The divine part of Bloom is simply his humanity - his assumption of a bond between himself and other created beings', *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 372.

<sup>88</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 430.



Joyce is evidently presenting different views of nationhood in this episode, reinventing Captain MacMorris' haphazard comments on Irish identity into a more significant debate within a modern setting and culture. What the reader senses in this Irish context is the general hostility towards Bloom because he is a Jew of Hungarian extraction who happens to have been born in Ireland. He is therefore considered to be outside the narrow insular scope and tribal definition of what constitutes citizenship, at least on Irish terms. At the heart of such a dialogue is the crucial conflict between self and other and what is considered to be stereotypically Irish or foreign. Bloom's vision of the Irish self is open to the possibility of the marginal and peripheral elements within culture, a recognisably global, multicultural perspective. The view is not shared by many of the characters in Barney Kiernan's pub who express racist tendencies (including the narrator of the episode), and the attitude towards Bloom is aggressive in nature. This is not to say that Joyce is suggesting that Irish culture is naturally hostile or that it is so complex that it cannot be defined or even that it is the same as culture anywhere else. Such claims would certainly undermine a key preoccupation of the author: the concern with 'the particular in the universal', finding in Ireland's personal history and identity a culture that is unique and at the same time one which can be used as a model for Everyman.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Paraphrasing Joyce's declaration: 'For myself, I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal'. John McGahern likewise describes how in his writing 'the local becomes the universal [. . .] Out of the particular we come on what is general, 'The Local and The Universal', John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 11.

Joyce's fiction cannot be separated from questions relating to Irish life, society and politics, as Vincent J. Cheng argues: 'Many of the revolutionary qualities of Joyce's stylistic, linguistic, and literary innovations can [. . .] be persuasively traced to, and grounded in, his sense of ideological, ethnic, and colonial dispossession . . . [His is] an intellect intensely concerned and pointedly thoughtful about the Irish "race", the "Irish question", and imperial England'.<sup>90</sup> Joyce makes his feelings about this very clear in his critical articles, often illustrating the consequences of a nation which has been subjugated under imperial domination, reflecting in one essay: 'the Irish question is not solved even today, after six centuries of armed occupation and more than a hundred years of English legislation, which has reduced the population of the unhappy island from eight to four million, quadrupled the taxes, and twisted the agrarian problem into many more knots'.<sup>91</sup> In such examples we find that his views are far from apolitical when it comes to the Irish situation and like Yeats he is concerned with overturning and challenging stereotypical and racist views of his people in literature and society.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, although it is generally agreed that the contrast to Yeats' homogenous view of culture is profound in Joyce's fiction, what has not always been considered is that a work such as *Ulysses* may not have been

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<sup>90</sup> Vincent J. Cheng, *Joyce, Race and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>91</sup> *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Ellsworth Mason (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 199.

<sup>92</sup> Consider Joyce's remarks in 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages': 'The idea that the Irish actually are the incapable and unbalanced cretins we read about in the leading articles in the *Standard* and the *Morning Post* is belied by the names of the three greatest translators in English literature: FitzGerald, translator of the *Rubaiyat* by the Persian poet, Omar Khayyam; Burton, translator of Arabic masterpieces; and Carey (sic), the translator of the *Divine Comedy*', *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, p. 123.

possible without the poet's influence. Yeats' writing challenges Joyce and forces him to adopt an alternate view of the self in Irish culture, fuelling his intellectual and artistic dialogue with the Irish Literary Movement.<sup>93</sup>

The encounter between both artists in 1902 has developed into a kind of mythology in itself. Here Yeats is seen as the dreamy romantic advocating that the 'folk life, the country life, is nature with abundance', whereas Joyce is viewed as the archetypal realist, putting the outdated poet in his place with the cryptic remark: 'I have met you too late. You are too old'.<sup>94</sup> Whatever dialogue took place between the two artists has led to the perception that they occupy polar opposites in Irish cultural studies, when in fact Yeats and Joyce shared a common goal. Their desire was to create an artistic style, independent of prejudice and dogma, which would implicitly define their own identity and the culture to which they belonged. Ellmann hints at this process when he defines how both artists 'spoke of a new age' dominated by poets and writers of unique talent where some form of 'spiritual elite would now reveal the hidden substance of God'.<sup>95</sup> The critic insists that 'the arc of each man was wide enough to include the other, and neither escaped the other's gravitational pull', recognising Joyce's defence of Yeats' play 'The Countess Cathleen' in 1899 as a

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<sup>93</sup> Stanislaus Joyce clarifies the influence of Yeats on Joyce's writing in *My Brother's Keeper*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 121.

<sup>94</sup> Emer Nolan cites Yeats as follows: 'the folk life, the country life, is nature with abundance, but the art life, the town life, is the spirit which is sterile when it is not married to nature', *James Joyce and Nationalism*, p. 23.

<sup>95</sup> Richard Ellmann, 'Yeats and Joyce': No. XI Dolmen Press, *Yeats, Centenary Papers* MCMLXV, 1967, p. 448.

celebration of this 'new moral code' in literature.<sup>96</sup> Joyce was willing to stand alone, castigated as the only student to withhold his signature from the petition condemning Yeats' play simply because he saw theatre, particularly the realist drama of Ibsen, as a way of liberating the multitude from 'spiritual bondage'.<sup>97</sup> He shared with Irish writers like 'Mangan and the early Yeats a liking for hypnotic undulations of language', and a desire to explore the individual self and soul in the work of art.<sup>98</sup>

In retrospect, both writers were successful in formulating a distinct, authentic view of the Irish self. For Yeats 'The self-conquest of the writer who is not a man of action is style'.<sup>99</sup> By this he meant that the artist must struggle with his own inner nature to create an art worthy of self-expression and cultural definition in the same way that a soldier can heroically defend or shape a nation's destiny. In the creation of this national literature, the poet would also transcend the mere quarrel with self and establish an indissoluble bond between artist and nation; between self and community, a connection that would extend to all Irish people, regardless of creed, religion or caste. Yeats explains this process as 'a tradition of life that makes neither great wealth nor great poverty, that makes the arts a natural expression of life, that permits even common men to understand good art and high thinking, and to have

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 447-449.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 453.

<sup>99</sup> 'Men are dominated by self-conquest; thought that is little obvious or platitudinous if merely written, becomes persuasive, immortal even, if held to amid the hurry of events. The self-conquest of the writer who is not a man of action is style.' Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 516. McGahern later appears to mirror Yeats' sentiments when he describes 'style' as 'the reflection of personality in language', *Love of the World*, p. 93.

the fine manners these things can give'.<sup>100</sup> He also identifies in the Irish literary tradition a certain 'quarrel between two traditions of life, one old and noble, one new and ignoble', and is conscious that this older 'nobility' would prove 'impossible' if it were not for 'the sacrifice of the few', a 'company' of writers driven by essential conflict ('the bitterness of protest') and by a 'fiery seed', apparently fuelled 'by the ideas and passions of the nation'.<sup>101</sup> Although this vision appears idealistic, it suggests that Yeats recognised Ireland as 'a nation' which had long established itself apart from England. His hope was that the Irish people would now employ 'every talent' in 'the freedom' which their art could potentially create. The unfortunate shortcomings of such a philosophy appear in the poet's middle-aged bitterness and frustrations concerning the materialism of the modern world, as he denotes in his poem 'The Statues':

We Irish, born into that ancient sect  
 But thrown upon this filthy modern tide  
 And by its formless, spawning, fury wrecked,  
 Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace  
 The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.<sup>102</sup>

Joyce would not subscribe to these singular views of modernity or individuality, recognising that Ireland had never really been free from the paralysis of a defined

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<sup>100</sup> Selected from ed. Colton Johnson, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, Vol 10, *Uncollected Articles, Reviews, and Radio Broadcasts Written After 1900*, '5: A Postscript to a Forthcoming Book of Essays by Various Writers', *All Ireland Review*, 1 December 1900 (New York, Scribner, 2000).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. Yeats speaks here of 'a movement of the intellect' which is 'growing in abundance' and reacting against the 'subtle net of bribery which England has spread among us by courts and colleges and Government offices', a movement which is capable of tearing that 'subtle net' to discover 'the form of the nation made perfect'.

<sup>102</sup> Yeats, 'The Statues', *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works*, p. 172.

past or restrictive present. He recognised the impact of community on the mind of the artist, although in his view it was futile to 'trace' an ancient heritage alone.<sup>103</sup> He did share with his counterpart a belief that the artist must be willing to 'forge in the smithy of [his] soul' an identity which was true to his own psychology and inner self.<sup>104</sup> The difference was in the discovery of a panoramic consciousness which could be endlessly renewed or explored through a particular locality, context or narrative. This was initiated in the epiphanies of *Stephen Hero* (1944) and *Dubliners* (1914), later developed in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and finally moulded into the perfection of *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Joyce, like Yeats, was the inheritor of a tradition, borrowing from an Irish, European and international culture various portraits of the artist, directly quoting from Flaubert's letters and influenced by Wilde's famous aphorism that 'Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth'.<sup>105</sup> Yeats is explicit in his interpretation or use of this mask and Joyce is implicit or indirect, using symbols, allusions and various mythologies as ways of distancing himself from what could be identified as his own distinctive voice and personality. He makes this clear in the opening lines of his 1901 lecture 'The Day of the Rabblement', when he writes: 'No Man, said the Nolan, can be a lover of the true or the good

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<sup>103</sup> Joyce supports this assertion when he declares in his essay 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages' that 'Just as ancient Egypt is dead, so is ancient Ireland', *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, p. 125.

<sup>104</sup> Stephen Dedalus' words, Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 213.

<sup>105</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist' (1891), *The Major Works: including the Portrait of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 282.

unless he abhors the multitude; and the artist, though he may employ the crowd, is very careful to isolate himself'.<sup>106</sup>

'The Day of the Rabblement' is one of the earliest notifications of Joyce's rejection of Yeats' Celtic Twilight; on the other hand, it can be viewed in connection with it in so far as there are reservations expressed about Irish culture. It seems fair to argue that Joyce here recognises the essential quarrel between artist and community and the sense of critical distance needed to establish sincerity in the work of art. That the artist should 'abhor' the multitude reflects how deeply the conflict is ingrained in his mind. The concern is with a past and a prevailing culture: the expression of a self which exists in Ireland prior to revolution and one that also recognises and, in many respects, embraces the fundamental tensions and changes in Irish society that will follow the 1916 rebellion.<sup>107</sup> But if Yeats revived the spirit of a romantic Ireland, Joyce gave expression to a more porous Irish identity which was not always fixed or in direct conflict with the 'filthy modern tide'; it was one that recognised paralysis in society, characterised by a fear of betrayal and a need to escape the obvious 'nightmare of history'.<sup>108</sup> Richard Kearney asserts that Joyce hoped 'to emancipate the self from the constraints of the past' and to demythologise

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<sup>106</sup> James Joyce, 'The Day of the Rabblement', *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, p. 50.

<sup>107</sup> Although Joyce's fiction is generally based in an Ireland before partition, it is important to note that his most important works, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* (in their full editions) were published after the division of the country.

<sup>108</sup> Paraphrasing Dedalus' words in *Ulysses*: 'History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake', p. 42.

‘the fetishized myths of the motherland’.<sup>109</sup> It was through art alone that he could achieve this liberation.

### **Joyce and the alternate self**

Before the publication of *Dubliners*, we find a yearning prevalent in Joyce’s mind to define or express the nature of his life and society. The finest example appears in his letter to Nora Barnacle on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1904, when he openly expresses his rejection of ‘the present social order and Christianity’ and curses the system responsible for his mother’s death, primarily the Catholic Church which he has grown to hate ‘most fervently’. As the letter develops, we are given the impression of a state of mind which is determined, passionate and above all sincere about what it is the writer is trying to create, regardless of his outcast status. Joyce appeals to Nora directly:

When you went in tonight I wandered along towards Grafton St where I stood for a long time leaning against a lamp-post, smoking [. . .] While I stood there I thought of a few sentences I wrote some years ago when I lived in Paris — [. . .] ‘They pass in twos and threes amid the life of the boulevard, walking like people who have leisure in a place lit up for them. They are in the pastry cook’s, chattering, crushing little fabrics of pastry [. . .] descending from carriages with a busy stir of garments soft as the voice of the adulterer. They pass in an air of perfumes . . .’ I knew that that life was still waiting for me if I chose to enter it. It could not give me perhaps the intoxication it had once given [. . .] I thought of all this and without regret I rejected it.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Richard Kearney, ‘Myth and Motherland’, *Ireland’s Field Day: Field Day Theatre Company*, p. 73.

<sup>110</sup> Joyce, *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 26.



There is no reason to suspect that Joyce's personal feelings and frustrations in this private letter are not genuine. What is very clear is that the fiction he is describing is inseparable from his personal life and we find within it the origins perhaps of that great attention to intimate detail, the sensuous descriptions which will later define his style in *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*. A line such as 'Under the perfumes their bodies have a warm humid smell' conjures up scenes reminiscent of Stephen's encounter with the prostitute or Leopold Bloom's voyeuristic moment with Gerty MacDowell.<sup>111</sup> Joyce's private letters reveal his unfortunate circumstances in Ireland, the concerns about money, the dedication to his art, his preoccupation with sex and the fear of inheriting his father's 'spendthrift habits'.<sup>112</sup> When he speaks of 'rejection', he is referring to a particular way of life and also to the political and religious forces which surround him, an apparently universal state of mind which creates a feeling of servitude and entrapment, restricting the expression of true art. Joyce's honesty in this letter is profound because in rejecting a Parisian culture or the particular Catholic culture to which he belongs, he is making himself a 'beggar' who retains a 'pride' in his true self. He informs Nora of this fact and of the sincerity of his feelings, as the letter progresses:

I spoke to you satirically tonight but I was speaking of the world not of you. I am an enemy of the ignobleness and slavishness of people but not of you. Can you not see the simplicity which is at the back of all my disguises? We all wear masks. Certain people who know that we are

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

much together often insult me about you. I listen to them calmly,  
disdaining to answer them but their least word tumbles my heart  
about like a bird in a storm.<sup>113</sup>

Joyce's private letters must always be considered when assessing his fiction. Here we find explicit evidence of the writer's conflict with the world, his desire to liberate the individual and the self from the 'slavishness' and bondage of cultural norms and expectations, both past and present. In the context of this Irish culture and society he knows all too well that living openly with a woman is not permitted and that cohabitation is considered a sin in Catholic Ireland and so he is forced to assume the 'mask' of silence and respectability. He adopts a 'cynical frankness of conduct', forcing him to use fiction in 'a style of scrupulous meanness' as a tool for purging the tensions within, of combating what Sartre calls the hell of other people.<sup>114</sup>

In *Dubliners* we find direct evidence of how fictional characters reveal their misfortunes and the private frustrations of the author. C  il  n Owens argues that in short stories such as 'After the Race' we are introduced to 'versions of Joyce's experiences during the final months of his life as a flaneur [. . .] the connections between ideas of progress, liberty, artistic sincerity and personal friendship', where characters such as Jimmy Doyle present 'a reductive caricature of Gogarty' and 'Villona is a charcoal sketch of Joyce himself'.<sup>115</sup> We also recognise in this story the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 83. Sartre's actual expression is *l'enfer, c'est les autres* ('Hell is — other people!') from *No Exit* (1944), quoted in *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1976), p. 45.

<sup>115</sup> C  il  n Owens, *Before Daybreak: "After the Race" and the Origins of Joyce's Art* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2013), p. 56.

writer's 'recent estrangement' from friends and community.

A further example can be found in the short story 'A Painful Case' which is modelled on Joyce's and his brother Stanislaus' 'estrangement' from their Catholic religion through extensive reading of a range of biblical and philosophical texts. Owens suggests that the experiences of Joyce's protagonist, James Duffy, is essentially the narrative of a 'spoiled priest' or 'man who rejects the gift of a priestly vocation', a decision which Joyce himself undertook.<sup>116</sup> Although Duffy has been rigidly indoctrinated by the Catholic Church, like the author he has read beyond the confines of his Christian upbringing and has been influenced by the works of Western philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.<sup>117</sup> This has led to a certain conflict within the mind, a tension between deeply religious values in childhood and a philosophy which believes in neither 'church nor creed', a 'spiritual life without any communion with others'.<sup>118</sup>

The protagonist's plight in 'A Painful Case' and his decision to end the relationship with the married Mrs Sinico because 'he could not have lived with her openly' may well represent what Joyce might have become if he had conformed to

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<sup>116</sup> C  il  n Owens, *James Joyce's Painful Case* (Florida: The University of Florida Press, 2008), xvi. Owens claims that the story bears more resemblance to the life and experiences of Joyce than previously imagined, claiming that 'there is continuity between "A Painful Case" and *Ulysses*: 'In one sense, his creation and rejection of Mr Duffy liberated him to imagine Bloom', xvii. Owens makes the philosophical and religious connections later in his study in his section on 'Schopenhauer and Religion,' *James Joyce's Painful Case*, p. 157.

<sup>117</sup> We are told early in the story that 'on his shelves stood two volumes by Nietzsche: *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*,' 'A Painful Case,' *Dubliners*, intro. Terence Brown (London: Penguin Books edition, 1992), p. 108.

<sup>118</sup> Joyce, 'A Painful Case,' *Dubliners*, p. 105.

the expectations of his society and ended his relationship with Nora.<sup>119</sup> Fiction allows the author to 'mask' his own internal conflicts, to flesh out that Yeatsian sense of opposites. The writer is all too aware that the personal dilemma he faces with his lover has not been confronted seriously in Irish culture because of conformity to a political and religious system which denies both artist and individual the liberation they seek. When Duffy learns of Sinico's death he retreats to a public house where the proprietor serves him 'obsequiously' and where we find the conversation focusing on 'the value of a gentleman's estate in County Kildare'.<sup>120</sup> The materialism and selfishness of Irish people (though not as blatant as in Yeats' poetry) is implicitly denoted, whilst the individual remains isolated and alone, within a culture indifferent to his plight. The climax appears when Duffy experiences his epiphany, a spiritual manifestation of inner turmoil which forces him to question the very nature of his life and existence, as Joyce reveals:

As he sat there, living over his life with her and evoking alternately the two images in which he now conceived her, he realised that she was dead, that she ceased to exist, that she had become a memory. He began to feel ill at ease. He asked himself what he could have done [. . .] How was he to blame? Now that she was gone he understood how lonely her life must have been, sitting night after night alone in that room. His life would be lonely too until he, too, died, ceased to exist, became a memory— if anyone remembered him [. . .] Why had he withheld life from her? Why had he sentenced her to death? He felt his moral nature falling to pieces.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Joyce, 'A Painful Case', *Dubliners*, p. 112.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

We find in this example an extraordinary insight into the state of mind of our protagonist, a feeling that forces the reader to suffer Duffy's moral and personal dilemma. Here Joyce is borrowing from a whole host of writers before him, a literary tradition which began with the Greek *anagnorisis* in ancient plays such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and was later employed by Shakespeare in the powerful soliloquies of the Elizabethan Theatre.<sup>122</sup> Long before the publication of *Dubliners*, in the early drafts of *Stephen Hero*, Joyce experiments with such 'epiphanies' in what his character Stephen defines as 'a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself'.<sup>123</sup> By focusing on what appear to be the trivialities of conversation or on momentary fragments of personal experience in fiction, Joyce effectively attributes universal significance to the ordinary and banal aspects of human existence, giving a sense of autonomy, selfhood, and moral or symbolic purpose to the everyday person. Stephen defines this in his conversation with Cranly when he discusses the nature of beauty according to Aquinas' philosophy:

First we recognise that the object is one integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a thing in

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<sup>122</sup> The moral insight into a character's spiritual or psychological state was also employed by the Russian novelists Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment* (1865-66) and Leo Tolstoy in works such as *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (complete publication 1878). We know that Joyce had read Tolstoy and considered him "a magnificent writer", as recorded in his letter to Stanislaus on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1905, see *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, p. 73.

<sup>123</sup> James Joyce, *Stephen Hero: Part of the First Draft of 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'* (London: Jonathan Cape edition, 1969), p. 216. Ellmann explains, in Joyce's words, that the epiphany was the sudden 'revelation of the whatness of a thing', the moment in which 'the soul of the commonest object [. . .] seems to us radiant', Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 87. Joyce himself collected twenty-two such epiphanies based on trivial conversations he heard, cited in William York Tindall's *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1979), p. 11.

fact: finally, when the relation of the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.<sup>124</sup>

Here the fictional preoccupations of the author clearly transcend the mere intimacies of literary realism and become ultimately symbolic, a representation of 'the soul of the commonest object', a manifestation of something beyond the ordinary, whilst encapsulating the banality of individual experience. It becomes something spiritual and deeply moral, perhaps influenced by the author's intellectual and religious roots in Catholicism. How is this relevant to the nature of the self in Irish literature and society? If we consider the situation in 'A Painful Case', we notice that we are presented with the inner emotions of an individual and are given insight into the moral framework of the society in which he lives. We learn all about Duffy's internal and external world (the 'integral things' of his life) during the course of the narrative: his fondness for books, his liking for Mozart, his fear of Dublin's 'gilded youth' and his marginal status in Chapelizod. We also sense the world and culture around him, either through the omniscient narration in the character's state of mind or in the relationship which he develops with Sinico. As readers, we acquire our own critical and detached judgement ('scrupulous meanness' in Joycean terms), recognising the oppressive domestic life of the female

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<sup>124</sup> James Joyce, *Stephen Hero: Part of the First Draft of 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'* (London: Jonathan Cape edition, 1969), p. 218.

character when informed that her husband, Captain Sinico, has 'dismissed his wife so sincerely from his gallery of pleasures that he did not suspect that anyone else would take an interest in her'.<sup>125</sup> The focus is not simply on the individual self, it is a critical examination of a nation's spiritual status.<sup>126</sup> In Duffy's case, the epiphany is a revelation of 'the very incarnation of Irish paralysis' when confronted with the futility of his situation after Sinico's death.<sup>127</sup> What we are seeing in Duffy's momentary revelation is the moral disintegration of the character's world and a story which explores 'the damnation of a soul'.<sup>128</sup> The individual's religious, social and intellectual life is in a state of paralysis because he has chosen to abandon what is true to his own nature: the desire for love and companionship beyond 'the soul's incurable loneliness'.<sup>129</sup>

What is clear is that the character cannot be entirely removed from the constraints of his community since he is not an independent soul at all. His visits to the public theatre and the routine existence which he pursues, in his dining regularly in a public place or working locally as a clerk in Baggot Street, prove that he is very much a product of his society, despite his reclusive nature. The repression of a rigid Catholic upbringing has given way to a present philosophical nihilism, creating

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<sup>125</sup> 'A Painful Case', *Dubliners*, p. 106.

<sup>126</sup> Seamus Deane claims that Joyce 'medicalized the condition of his culture and subjected it to a surgical analysis', 'Joyce the Irishman', *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 40.

<sup>127</sup> *Stephen Hero*, p. 216.

<sup>128</sup> "'A Painful Case'" is an account of the damnation of a soul [. . .] His subsequent turning to Nietzsche's works, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*, indicates the further disintegration of the remaining certainties in his life', C  il  n Owens, *James Joyce's Painful Case*, p. 176.

<sup>129</sup> 'A Painful Case', *Dubliners*, p. 107.

conflict between traditional faith and the subsequent abandonment to atheism, leading to the terrifying prospect of loneliness. As a consequence, he feels that his 'moral nature [is] falling to pieces'. This is particularly significant for understanding the nature of Irish identity at the turn of the twentieth century because we are now presented with a blatant conflict between self and community in a given place and context. The battle is between natural desire and social or religious expectations, rooted in that longing for intellectual and spiritual freedom which form the basis for the entire *Dubliners* collection. Joyce points this out in the recurring feud with his publisher Grant Richards, when he explains the need to express the truth about his society and culture, regardless of the consequences, asserting:

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis [. . .]The points on which I have not yielded are the points that rivet the book together. If I eliminate them what becomes of the chapter of the moral history of my country? [. . .] I believe that in composing my chapter of moral history in exactly the way that I have composed it I have taken the first step towards the spiritual liberation of my country. Reflect for a moment on the history of the literature of Ireland as it stands at present written in the English language before you condemn this genial illusion of mine . . .'<sup>130</sup>

In this example Joyce alludes to the 'moral history' of a culture which has not yet been 'spiritually liberated' from the scrutiny of the past and refers to the 'history of a literature' which has been written only on 'English' terms. It is foremost a declaration of the rights and entitlement of the individual to express his world in a

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<sup>130</sup> Joyce, *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, pp. 83-89.



new and artistic form. Joyce's alternative view of the self in Irish literature is one that recognises a disturbing 'prophecy of failure' in the decision to deny what is true to one's nature, whether it be the author's own pursuit of an artistic life or, as in Duffy's case, the denial of romantic love and passion in favour of a stoical nihilism which ends in spiritual despair.<sup>131</sup> Duffy's deluded belief that 'every bond is a bond to sorrow' cannot be the solution to the 'moral' or 'spiritual liberation' which Joyce's art envisages because it culminates in the protagonist's ultimate loneliness and isolation. It is clear, for example, that the author embraced his love for Nora, celebrated the joys of having children and pursued in the end a successful literary career, all of which cannot be attributed to the fictional character Duffy. Joyce's writing seeks to liberate the individual from the shackles of conformity and oppression through the medium of art, although it especially focuses on the 'moral nature' of his society, encompassing a deeper concern with the nature of the Irish self because of the direct impact that culture plays in the life of the individual.

Although critics have recognised in Joyce's letters to Richards an important blueprint for analysis of *Dubliners*, they have not always acknowledged the central importance in understanding the concept of 'the self' in modern culture and society. A.C. Bradley informs us of a similar concern in Shakespeare's theatre during the Elizabethan Age when the audience is confronted perhaps for the first time with a protagonist's free will and capacity for individual choice in a world which was

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<sup>131</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p. 105.

conventionally structured according to God's laws.<sup>132</sup> In Shakespeare we find a new way of viewing the individual based on a freedom which could not always be attributed to the drama of the ancient Greeks, within a culture which recognised predestination or the intervention of the Gods as central to the fate and destiny of all human beings. In an increasingly secularised world, where God's presence suddenly becomes questionable through the scientific theories of figures like Darwin or the philosophical scepticism of Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, the issue of morality becomes increasingly dependent on the individual and his own personal perspective. Developments in modern psychology, beginning with Freudian psychoanalysis, and then later advances in neurology, astronomy and computer science, add further controversy to traditional debates about self and soul. On the other hand, Joyce dismissed strictly scientific assessments of human nature and rejected Sigmund Freud's exploration of the self on the grounds that it was 'mechanical'.<sup>133</sup> His art recognises the influences or pressures of environment and change in the private life of the individual through a multiplicity of experiences and styles in works such as *Ulysses*. The ultimate purpose of the fiction is to reaffirm belief in a spiritual self which recognises 'the personality of the artist', and a

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<sup>132</sup> A.C. Bradley claims that the heart of Shakespearean tragedy lies in 'action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action', *Shakespearean Tragedy: lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Macmillan, 1905), p. 12.

<sup>133</sup> 'Joyce claimed that Vico anticipated Freud (Ellmann *James Joyce* 340). He denounced Freud as "mechanical," referring to the universal symbolism (382)', quoted in Patrick Colm Hogan, *Joyce, Milton, and the Theory of Influence* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), p. 54. The scientific approach was appreciated by Joyce but he did not believe that this method alone could define human nature, see Stephen Dedalus' reactions to 'applied science' and the assessment of 'Beauty expressed by the artist' in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, pp. 162-173.

‘conscious’ process in favour of the intellectual or ‘existential’ aspects of our nature,<sup>134</sup> just as James Duffy searches for a personal ‘creed’ beyond the norms and tensions of his community.<sup>135</sup>

Modern conceptions of selfhood and belief are based largely on the sense of entitlement to life and personal happiness and not always on what our religious leaders tell us to believe. They are to be understood and adhered to in legal or cultural documents, enshrined within our laws, such as the right to freedom of speech or recognised notions of gender and racial equality, as prescribed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When we think of human identity and our own concept of ‘self’ today, we are inevitably connecting this to the ‘moral history of our country’ and the way that we function as a community or within the space that we occupy as a global network of people. Charles Taylor makes this essential point in *Sources of the Self* (1989), when he contends:

What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me [. . .] and the issue of my identity is worked out only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as

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<sup>134</sup> ‘The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself’, see Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 180. The writer’s many intellectual influences include Catholic and secular philosophy. The roots of ‘existentialism’ are present in his art through the exploration of modern consciousness and personal experience. Understanding the self at a subconscious level is also significant for identifying instinctive or deeper psychological processes in the author’s fiction, but it should be noted that Joyce is openly critical of psychoanalysis and focuses primarily on the ‘conscious’ mind. He describes Jung and Freud as ‘the Swiss Tweedledum and the Viennese Tweedledee’, see *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, p. 282.

<sup>135</sup> This personal ‘creed’ explains why Duffy battles to understand his ‘spiritual life’ and ultimately fails in his relationship with Sinico. He chooses to sacrifice his own happiness in favour of what is deemed socially or traditionally acceptable within his community, see Joyce, ‘A Painful Case’, *Dubliners*, p. 105.

a valid articulation of these issues [. . .]A language only exists and is maintained within a language community. And this indicates another crucial feature of a self. One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it.<sup>136</sup>

The argument here is that it is only possible to understand the artistic world of Joyce or Yeats or any established writer by understanding the nature of the artist's environment and the relationship he shares with a particular culture. In 'A Painful Case' there is an obvious tension between the individual and his surroundings; the conflict between self and community is rooted in the battle between personal desire for freedom and self-expression and the social norms and expectations which hold the individual back from flight or action. The fact that Joyce's fiction predates the introduction of universal human rights proves that he is a precursor of modern notions of freedom and liberty espoused by liberal democracies today. The author's frustrations are rooted in the conflict with his community, which happens to be literary, political and religious, evident in his personal letters to would-be publishers and his comments on the Catholic Church and the British government, all of which appear to be the target of his fiction or the source of his discontent. If the problem is, as Charles Taylor contends, essentially rooted in the linguistics of culture itself, then there are deeper concerns for a country like Ireland where the native language no longer exists in the collective consciousness or where it is subverted by another cultural or linguistic unit. The consequences may be a sense of displacement or

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<sup>136</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 34-35.

confusion in terms of one's own sense of being and identity, resulting in what Joyce calls the 'hemiplegia or paralysis' afflicting his native city and culture.<sup>137</sup> In *My Brother's Keeper*, Stanislaus Joyce best explains how this sense of disorder has a certain advantage for 'men of genius', reflecting:

In Ireland, a country which has seen revolution in every generation, there is properly speaking no national tradition. Nothing is stable in the country; nothing is stable in the minds of the people. When the Irish artist begins to write, he has to create his moral world from chaos by himself, for himself. Yet, though this is an enormous disadvantage for a host of writers of good average talent, it proves to be an enormous advantage for men of original genius, such as Shaw, Yeats or my brother.<sup>138</sup>

For great writers like Yeats and Joyce there is recognition of the limitations as well as the potential to invent or recreate language or literature to their liking. In a culture that has not ever been coherently or holistically defined at home, except by influences outside the country's geographical borders, there is the necessity to find unity and expression in a common cause, for example through literary or political revolution. There is also a need to establish a sense of linguistic separateness in the effort to express this culture. The finest example in Joyce's fiction appears in *Portrait* when the young Stephen recognises the linguistic chasm and separation in terms of culture between the English dean of studies and himself. He accepts that his own understanding of English as an Irishman is an 'acquired speech', admitting that:

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<sup>137</sup> Joyce to Constantine Curran, July 1904, cited in *Selected Letters*, p. 22. This becomes a central theme in Brian Friel's landmark play *Translations* (1981), when the schoolmaster Hugh O'Donnell argues that the solution to the Irish problem can only be found by renewing our definition of the culture around us, arguing that: 'we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilise', quoted in *Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 66.

<sup>138</sup> Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper*, p. 187.

'The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine [. . .] My soul frets in the shadow of his language'.<sup>139</sup> Again the preoccupation with linguistics becomes a moral or spiritual concern to be resolved by the artist alone and it could be argued that in creating his fictional characters Joyce implicitly employs the Wildean mask to create the perfect antithesis or escape from this cultural dilemma. The writer's decision is that he will live openly with his lover, whereas characters like James Duffy cannot. The inevitable choice comes at a price, so that the individual either remains 'outcast from life's feast' or chooses exile from the native culture, where it is at least possible 'to forge' a new understanding of the self through spiritual and artistic distance.<sup>140</sup>

At the centre of Joyce's conception of the Irish self is the relationship between personal identity and morality where 'selfhood and the good [. . .] turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes'.<sup>141</sup> Duffy is searching for a solution to his 'moral' dilemma, and the sense of his identity is only possible after an understanding of where he has come from and how he has developed into his current position. As a result of Sinico's death, he questions how he could have acted differently in his liaisons and conduct towards her. His epiphany is a way of growing into an understanding of his own self and situation, a recognition of the inner turmoil and

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<sup>139</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 159.

<sup>140</sup> James Duffy's epiphany: 'he was outcast from life's feast', *Dubliners*, p. 113. Stephen Dedalus' diary: 'to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race', *A Portrait*, p. 213.

<sup>141</sup> Charles Taylor supports the view that selfhood is achieved only through development and experience: 'I don't have a sense of where/what I am, as I argued above, without some understanding of how I have got there or become so. My sense of myself is of a being [. . .] growing and becoming', *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, p. 3.

psychological torment which comes with learning to accept who and what he is. The fate of Bob Doran in 'The Boarding House' represents a similar conflict, where we find a character trapped and confined against his will at the end of the narrative, destined to marry a woman he does not love due to forces seemingly beyond his control. Again the focus is on a society which is removed from issues of sound moral or critical judgement. Mrs Mooney, we are told, 'deals with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat', sacrificing her own daughter's happiness to ensure that she fits into the appropriate conduct of a religiously sensitive society.<sup>142</sup> Doran is incapable of following his own heart, the instinct to escape his confinement, merely asking the question: '*What am I to do?*' His solution is simply to give into the socially constructed philosophy that 'the sin was there [. . .] reparation must be made for such a sin'.<sup>143</sup> As he descends the staircase to make the inevitable decision (presumably to marry Polly) his glasses become 'dimmed with moisture', a symbol of his entrapment and clouded vision. Joyce writes:

He longed to ascend through the roof and fly away to another country where he would never hear again of his trouble, and yet a force pushed him downstairs step by step. The implacable faces of his employer and of the Madam stared on his discomfiture.<sup>144</sup>

Here we recognise the ultimate pressures to which the Irish self is exposed: identity and culture in Ireland are determined by social expectations, in this case by the bonds of Catholic marriage and 'respectability' represented in the existence of the

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<sup>142</sup> Joyce, 'The Boarding House', *Dubliners*, p. 58.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

employer and the Madam. The 'force' mentioned (the pressures and constraints of society) appears in direct conflict with private emotion in the form of Doran's free will. If in *Dubliners* Joyce exposes the hypocrisy of socially constructed norms often through the behaviour of minor characters, the individual is more often forced to choose between conformity and retreat in the struggle between private and public emotions. We see this perhaps most explicitly in 'Eveline' when the main character is unable to take the crucial decision to elope with her lover Frank because of what others would 'say of her in the Stores' or for fear of her father's violence. The desire for exploration of 'another life with Frank' is deeply prevalent within the protagonist's mind and in the end she is incapable of following her dream.<sup>145</sup> Nothing is revealed of Eveline's future, but it is certainly implied: she will inevitably remain a servant of others, rather than a free agent on her own terms.<sup>146</sup> The obsession with treachery which Joyce recognises in his critical writings is being ultimately replaced by a sense of infidelity on personal terms.<sup>147</sup>

What Joyce reveals about the moral state of his country is that it is essential for the modern individual to take responsibility for his own fate and destiny, to stand up to the social forces which ensure physical or spiritual degeneration. In the author's own personal case, he succeeds in leaving Ireland, fleeing the country of his

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<sup>145</sup> Joyce, 'Eveline', *Dubliners*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>146</sup> 'For seven centuries she [Ireland] has never been a faithful subject of England. Neither has she been faithful to herself', Joyce, *Critical Writings*, ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), pp. 212-13.

<sup>147</sup> Seamus Deane argues that 'Treachery and fidelity are the terms which determine the development of Joyce's fiction', *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, p. 45. Owens' research on *Dubliners* alternatively offers further insights into the more personal aspects of nature and community.



birth in a way that a host of his characters cannot: Bob Doran, Eveline, Farrington and little Chandler, all of whom succumb to similar feelings of frustration, anger or loneliness. The consequences for Doran are revealed later when he resurfaces as the inebriated, pitiful character we recognise in *Ulysses*, whereas for the author the choice ultimately frees him (at least physically) from the restrictions of his culture and society, allowing him to forge his true self in the creation of the work of art. It may be that the death of Joyce's mother marked the defining moment of liberation for the artist and his own personal epiphany was the need to escape the 'hemiplegia of the will' afflicting his fellow Dubliners.<sup>148</sup> In a famous letter to Nora the author describes how looking on his mother's face 'as she lay in her coffin — a face grey and wasted with cancer — I understood that I was looking on the face of victim and I cursed the system which made her a victim'.<sup>149</sup> Some critics suggest that with the loss of this maternal influence Joyce is forced into a situation where he must make his own moral choices.<sup>150</sup> We see the significance of this in *Ulysses*, where the young Stephen Dedalus appears troubled and preoccupied following his mother's death in the opening pages.

In his correspondence with Grant Richards relating to the censorship and delayed publication of *Dubliners*, Joyce suggests that the publisher 'will retard the

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<sup>148</sup> Eamon Hughes has asked a similar question about John McGahern: 'Would McGahern have become a writer if his mother had lived?' This was delivered at: *A Way of Seeing: Fifty Years of McGahern in Print* conference at Queen's University Belfast on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

<sup>149</sup> Joyce, *Selected Letters*, p. 25.

<sup>150</sup> 'For James [. . .] her death was not just shattering but a turning point [. . .] his mother [was] no longer a moral presence in his life', Gordon Bowker, *James Joyce: A Biography* (London: Phoenix, 2012), p. 112.

course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in [his] nicely polished looking glass'.<sup>151</sup> By this he means that the Irish have not yet been given a sense of selfhood or autonomy, either politically or spiritually, because of a history of betrayal and subservience to both church and government. He attributes his own emergence as an artist, the coming to terms with his own nature, with the spiritual state of a new and emerging Irish nation prior to independence. The 'looking glass' surfaces throughout his fiction, as if it were a projection of his own self and circumstances, where protagonists often reveal the preoccupations of the author. The rejected Gabriel Conroy in 'The Dead', seeing himself in the mirror as a 'ludicrous figure,' appears to parallel Joyce's fears of Nora's betrayal. 'The Dead' is the most significant story in *Dubliners* and poignant because it skilfully portrays the author's personal fears of failure and betrayal, whilst illustrating the spiritual paralysis of a nation. The final description of the snow 'falling faintly through the universe' might well capture this bleak reality, but it also liberates the protagonist from a deluded, false sense of security about his life and relationship.<sup>152</sup> It forces the reader to come to terms with the misunderstandings and insecurities which define the human condition and the nature of an Irish identity which is far from romantic. Gabriel's presence is a serious effort to engage with the psychological condition of a living person at a given moment in Irish history, a way of making sense of a self and culture which seem oblivious to reality. If the

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<sup>151</sup> Joyce, *Selected Letters*, p. 90.

<sup>152</sup> Joyce, 'The Dead,' *Dubliners*, p. 225.

protagonist is presented as misguided, serious and intellectually at odds with the other guests present, he is also forced to come to terms with his own self-image and psychology, evident from the opening moments of the narrative, as he pensively broods over his speech: 'He would fail with them just as he had failed with the girl in the pantry. He had taken up a wrong tone. His whole speech was a mistake from first to last, an utter failure'.<sup>153</sup>

There are some recognisable parallels between Gabriel's anxieties in 'The Dead' and Joyce's own views regarding 'a superior education' at Clongowes and Belvedere. The protagonist and author are always questioning how they relate to others — in Joyce's case, he is frustrated that the 'indifferent public' fails to appreciate his art or 'understand' his chapter of moral history. The delusion which Gabriel suffers in imagining that he understands Gretta's thoughts and feelings, that they can actually escape 'from their lives and duties [. . .] and run away together with wild and radiant hearts' is not possible in the end (despite the irony of Joyce's own self-exile).<sup>154</sup> This is because the culture to which he belongs is inept, paralysed by its own restrictive dependence on the past, since the dead generations appear to haunt the nation. The protagonist, unlike the artist, is trapped and unable to attain spiritual liberation. Equally relevant to these feelings of servility and entrapment are Stephen Dedalus' thoughts in *Ulysses* when he looks into the mirror and proclaims

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<sup>153</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, p. 179.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126

'It is a symbol of Irish art [. . .] the cracked looking glass of a servant'.<sup>155</sup> This reveals the inner psychology of Joyce, fearful that he, like so many of his fictional characters, will be unable to escape the clutches of Church and empire because he is suffering from deep feelings of repression and insecurity. The fiction becomes an effort to purge the demons within Joyce's own self and soul, to overcome the burden of a fragmented history and past in order to embrace a more open and comprehensive future in exile.

Joyce's fiction, although rooted in the realities of twentieth-century urban life in Dublin, inevitably expresses the personality of the artist and his unique sense of self through the style and form of the work of art. The contradictions within the writer's nature, much like those of Yeats, are brought to the fore through a distinctive style, in this case in the development of an impersonal and objective form of narrative. By creating a convincing depiction of a protagonist like Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait* and revealing how the character's experiences do not always emulate those of the author, Joyce carefully removes his own personal finger-prints from the work of fiction so that any possible parallels or inconsistencies between the writer and character are open to interpretation. This allows the artist a degree of immunity and separation from his art, a kind of antithetical mask, so that it cannot be definitively stated that Joyce is Stephen or that Stephen is Joyce or that the author is affiliated with any particular party or point of view, as he expresses through the words of his protagonist:

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<sup>155</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 6.

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak [. . .] The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.<sup>156</sup>

This critical distance creates a sense of ambiguity in literature because we already know that much of the writer's life is evident within the fiction. Padraic Colum recorded in 1918, for example, that 'What Stephen says [to the character Lynch in the novel] is, word for word, what Joyce used to say to many of us who were with him in [his] early twenties'.<sup>157</sup>

In *My Brother's Keeper*, Stanislaus insists to the contrary that '*A Portrait* [. . .] is not an autobiography; it is an artistic creation' which perhaps explains why his brother later informed Frank Budgen that he did not always agree with Stephen's aesthetic theory. Moreover, in a 1904 essay entitled '*A Portrait of the Artist*' the author portrays a very different view of how to emulate the self in literature, defining the limitations of autobiography in recreating one's past, when he argues:

The features of infancy are not commonly reproduced in the adolescent portrait for, so capricious are we, that we cannot or will not conceive the past in any other than its iron memorial aspect. Yet the past assuredly implies a fluid succession of presents, the development of an entity of which our actual present is a phase only.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 181.

<sup>157</sup> *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Robert H. Deming (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 164.

<sup>158</sup> James Joyce, '*A Portrait of the Artist*' (1904), cited in ed. Richard Ellmann, A. Walton Litz and John Whittier-Ferguson *James Joyce: Poems and Shorter Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 211.

This explains the rather unconventional opening of *A Portrait*. Joyce's reinvention of the traditional fairy-tale is the first fictional effort in modern literature to create a self through the eyes of a young child who engages with life through the senses, in the sound of his father reading or in the more pleasant smell of his mother's perfume. We know that this material is autobiographical, that the author's father did indeed call his son 'baby tuckoo' and that the boy shared a close relationship with his mother.<sup>159</sup> There is scepticism towards replicating perfect experience in art, however, illustrated in how the mind is presented in the fiction. Joyce knows he is dealing with an 'artistic creation' and so he presents a style of narrative which creates a living portrait of a young man's life, a window into experience through the thoughts and perceptions of Stephen Dedalus. The emergence of a new kind of self in literature is introduced through an innovative style of narration. The character becomes a reflection of a developing child and its emerging sense of identity, as well as Joyce's own interpretation of his personal past: a 'fluid succession of presents' which both imitate and reshape the author's impression of his own life and experiences.<sup>160</sup>

Stephen Dedalus' sense of self is determined by his decision to become an artist, by the desire to create or formulate the 'uncreated conscience of his race',

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<sup>159</sup> This is supported by Richard Ellmann in his biography *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 303.

<sup>160</sup> The fairy-tale is an invention in itself and the implication may be that it is now time to recreate or reinvent a new form of Irish self, one that is based on a form of realism; of holding a mirror up to Irish psychological and linguistic experience.

which parallels Joyce's intention to give Ireland 'to the world'.<sup>161</sup> The quest is for an identity or selfhood which breaks free from the confines of an oppressive culture and to revise stereotypical notions of nationhood, possibly to redefine and revise what is meant by Irish identity and consciousness. This is achieved ultimately through the protagonist's growing linguistic awareness, where identity is constructed and moulded through language acquisition within culture and community. Self and art therefore become interdependent and are formed simultaneously. The boy's confidence grows as his vocabulary develops, from a position of linguistic insecurity when he encounters the dean of studies, into a 'mastery of language' in the final chapter.<sup>162</sup> The irony is that the individual existence is inextricably confined by community so that the emergence of selfhood and autonomy is always questionable. James Naremore contends that 'Stephen tries to isolate himself in a private world, but the novel makes us feel the pressure of a public world outside [. . .] the private self [cannot] be isolated from the larger, objective world'.<sup>163</sup> In *A Portrait* we always sense this conflict with community which often appears as a struggle between Church authority and the self as individual. The inner conflict is always between artistic or personal desire and adherence to religious

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<sup>161</sup> Joyce's letter to Stanislaus, dated 24<sup>th</sup> September 1905: 'When you remember that Dublin has been a capital for thousands of years [. . .] It seems strange that no artist has given it to the world', *Selected Letters*, p. 78.

<sup>162</sup> Seamus Deane asserts: 'the subject of the book becomes, in a formal sense, its author [. . .] through which we see a young mind [Stephen's] coming to grips with the world through an increasing mastery of language', *A Short History of Irish Literature*, p. 182.

<sup>163</sup> James Naremore, 'Consciousness and Society in *A Portrait of the Artist*', ed. Robert F. Staley and Bernard Benstock, *Approaches to Joyce's Portrait: Ten Essays* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976), p. 113.

responsibility. Stephen's conscience is wracked by Catholic guilt after the encounter with the prostitute and we learn that the 'sins trickled from his lips [. . .] in shameful drops from his soul festering and oozing like a sore'.<sup>164</sup> The artist within him finds it impossible to conform to the strict teachings of the Church because it would mean the denial of personal identity, where the expression of the self would be compromised. The protagonist grows to recognise that 'When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight'.<sup>165</sup> He struggles inwardly with his vocation to become a priest, finally learning to rely entirely upon his own sense of moral and artistic certitude, advocating:

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use — silence, exile, and cunning.<sup>166</sup>

These lines have a deep liberating quality and there are implications for Irish culture in the relationship with Church history and dogma. The pronoun 'I' conceives a unique sense of personal identity, a form of liberation from 'home, fatherland or my church' which highlights the individual's inevitable conflict with community. The aspiration is nonetheless stifled, restricted and incomplete through the need for 'defence', the desire to escape through 'silence, exile, and cunning'. Joyce is aware of the moral and spiritual dilemma which the artist faces in the quarrel with his

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<sup>164</sup> Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 121

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.



surroundings. It may seem strange to a modern audience that his writing was initially censored or so vehemently opposed at home and abroad based on such sentiments; on the other hand it is perfectly understandable when we consider the Irish context. The protagonist Stephen is advocating a form of personal and intellectual liberation from the conventions of his country and religion. The Ireland of Joyce's youth is a culture where the Church and fatherland are one, where religion ruthlessly dominates every aspect of the nation's soul, its social and intellectual life. What the artist offers the individual here is a form of spiritual escape from this servitude, a new way of looking at the self, of defining one's own purpose and identity through the medium of the work of art. The artist is called upon to replace the priest, the statesman or the politician as articulator of a new and revised sense of Irish identity, ultimately becoming the true repository of the spiritual life of the nation.<sup>167</sup>

### **Yeats, Joyce and posterity**

The connection which Yeats and Joyce share in their efforts to create an understanding of Irish identity and the self is closely related to the relationship between art and community. Firstly, the personal self can only be understood through the distinctive style of the artist which expresses the inevitable quarrel with

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<sup>167</sup> Stanislaus Joyce describes how his brother 'felt it was imperative that he should save his real spiritual life from being overlaid and crushed by a false one that he had outgrown. He believed that poets in the measure of their gifts and personality were the repositories of the genuine spiritual life of their race, and that priests were usurpers. He detested falsity and believed in individual freedom more thoroughly than any man I have ever known', *My Brother's Keeper*, pp. 120-121.

oneself and the resolution of the many opposing aspects of personality — the contradictions within the mind of the author. This can be achieved either through the artist's own critical and objective distance or through the creation of antithesis, what Yeats calls the 'anti-self' and what Joyce disguises as allusion or mythology in the form of a mask. Secondly, the work of art must expose fundamental truths about the nature of the individual and his society and the relationship between the two, either in coming to terms with key political and social certainties (in Yeats' case the rise of materialism and philistinism) or by exposing the moral nature of that society (as Joyce reveals in *Dubliners*). The self and community therefore become interdependent and visible through the forging of a particular style which gives sincerity of expression to both the individual and the nation as a whole (to the deeper conscious concerns of one's own community and cultural background). The conflict appears in the inevitable struggle between private emotion or personal feeling and the concerns of a wider and more demanding public. For this reason Yeats and Joyce share a preoccupation with art as a way of freeing the self from the chains of community and at the same time recognise the inability to escape the various cycles of history which determine our identity. This is most apparent in the complexity of works such as *A Vision* and *Finnegans Wake*, both of which emerge at the end of each artist's career. These texts remain the most controversial and misunderstood of Yeats' and Joyce's art and yet they reveal an intense effort to come to terms with 'a certain type of historical consciousness', an effort to reveal either a pattern or plurality to human experience or a way of defining the fragmented nature

of self, language and community.<sup>168</sup> The one certainty is that each text is concerned with confronting the linguistic problems associated with history and culture and of creating a structure which represents or becomes the art form itself.

Yeats and Joyce go far beyond any previous Irish artist in efforts to determine the nature of national identity in relation to the complex historical processes which determine its existence. Their emphasis on the role of the artist as apart from or at odds with the multitude, of using literature as a way of defining what it is to be Irish and essentially human, effectively establishes, perhaps for the first time in Irish history, a sense of self and community at home and abroad.<sup>169</sup> After Yeats and Joyce it is possible for a new generation of writers to confront the complex questions and concerns in relation to the Irish self in a new and decisive way, one which is no longer strictly within the shadow of an English literary tradition. In the forging of their art, both writers essentially create a new tradition, renewing an understanding of their culture. Their literature in one sense liberates and in another opens up the possibility of alternative ways of understanding the individual, recognising a sense of opposites: the difference between perceptions of self and other, both historically and universally.

Literature in Ireland after Yeats and Joyce is concerned primarily with resolving the conflict between self and community, of giving expression to Irish

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<sup>168</sup> Alistair Cormac, *Yeats and Joyce: Cyclical History and the Reprobate Tradition*, p. 117.

<sup>169</sup> 'The history of modern literature would be different without them', Robert F. Garrett, *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (California: University of California Press, 1989), ix.

identity through a fundamental analysis of language and of capturing the spirit of Irish experience through the medium of the work of art, a legacy entrusted to them by their literary forefathers. The chapters which follow explore how the next generation of writers (Liam O'Flaherty, Patrick Kavanagh and John McGahern) responded to the legacy of Yeats and Joyce and articulated their own understanding of self and culture, helping to ensure the development of modern Irish writing. When viewed in the context of Irish history and personal experience, it is only possible to understand each individual artist's distinctive sense of self by examining his quarrel with others.

## Chapter 2: O'Flaherty's 'wild tumult'

'Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave and I will wear him  
In my heart's core', Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Act III Scene II).

On 18<sup>th</sup> October 1924 Liam O'Flaherty, returning from early wanderings abroad, a brief sojourn in England, and celebrating the recent publication of his second novel, *The Black Soul*, wrote to the editor of the *Irish Statesman* expressing 'the passion that is within the heart' of Irish culture, and comparing his country to the England of Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> In this powerfully emotive letter, O'Flaherty encapsulated the essential conflict or battle within the mind of the literary artist in Irish society in efforts to come to terms with the nature of his community. Comparing the Irish people to Shakespeare's dynamic 'race', which was 'emerging with blood-shot eyes, lean, hungry, virile [. . .] from the savagery of feudalism into the struggle for Empire,' O'Flaherty celebrated the 'excess of energy' and 'force' which defined the emergence of the Irish Free State.<sup>2</sup> The writer ended the letter praising the violence, passion and vitality of a living nation which should not be 'ashamed' of its intensity of 'motion', asserting:

In Ireland, to my mind, we have reached that point in the progress of our race, the point which marked the appearance of Shakespeare in English literature.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, ed. A. A. Kelly (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1996), p. 105. O'Flaherty's letter was originally published in Vol 3, No. 6, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1924, the *Irish Statesman*, under the heading of 'National Energy'.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

Let us not be ashamed that gunshots are heard on our streets. Let us rather be glad. For force is, after all, the opposite of sluggishness. It is an intensity of movement, of motion? And motion is the opposite of death [. . .] ours is the wild tumult of the unchained storm, the tumult of the army on the march, clashing its cymbals, rioting with excess of energy. Need we be ashamed of it?<sup>3</sup>

The defining characteristic of O'Flaherty's art is that it reflects the 'passionate intensity' of the Irish situation and the conflicting nature of the Irish self, a quarrel which is deeply rooted in personal experience and shaped primarily by the relationship with other writers and figures within his community.<sup>4</sup> O'Flaherty's letter to the *Irish Statesman* may unsettle an audience which has just 'emerged' from the turbulence of the Irish 'Troubles' (both in the past or the present), where 'gunshots' are heard on a daily basis, and yet to a man who experienced the conflict of the First World War and the Irish Civil War at first hand, violence was simply a part of the natural order of things, an expression of the nation's living 'energy' and an essential link between man and nature, a relationship which features significantly in many of his novels and short stories. Here we often find characters struggling between a desire to return or escape back to nature, as in *The Informer* (1925). The writer is sensitive to the natural world and often describes animals with distinct maternal and human qualities, which reminds us of the inextricable bond between parent and child, as is the case in 'The Cow's Death' (1923).

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> This citation is borrowed from Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming', where he writes: 'the best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity', *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), p. 91. The phrase is also used by AE to describe his reaction to the new realism prevalent in Irish literature after independence, cited in John Zneimer's *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1970), p. 18.

O'Flaherty believed that 'all passion is beautiful whether it is hatred or love' and for this reason the artist must be willing to engage with various human emotions in literature, including man's capacity for violence.<sup>5</sup> The author follows a tradition of realist writers such as Maupassant or Dostoyevsky, who each explore the psychology and inner conflict of characters. He is also interested in the human desire to reach a state of divine perfection within or beyond nature, influenced by the reading of philosophers such as Nietzsche. These ideas will be discussed in this chapter, as it is worth considering whether or not O'Flaherty was the product of his time: a man steeped in a nineteenth-century philosophy of self-sacrifice, patriotic duty, revolutionary ideas and personal struggle.

What is most interesting about O'Flaherty's controversial letter is his celebration of the domestic situation in Ireland in metaphorical terms, when he refers to 'the wild tumult of the unchained storm'. The suggestion is that it is only through active participation in the intensity of the moment that great art, literature and civilisations flourish, and it is exactly this conflict of emotions within the artist and the reaction to his surroundings which can lead to a greater understanding of his personal life and circumstances. Declan Kiberd sees in O'Flaherty's letter and in his writings that he 'attempts to re-create the energy and spirit of the insurrectionists' of 1916, where the 'unchained storm' represents a form of protest against the static and 'sluggish' nature of peace-time, and where the 'energy' of great

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<sup>5</sup> O'Flaherty's words in *Shame the Devil*, cited in A. A. Kelly, *Liam O'Flaherty: The Storyteller* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 82.

art is somehow lost in the tranquillity of the moment.<sup>6</sup> O'Flaherty later remarked in an article for the *Irish Statesman* that 'the most glorious gesture in the history of [his] country was the gesture of those who died in 1916'.<sup>7</sup>

In the novel *Insurrection* (1950), he illustrates this feeling in the thoughts of the character Madden, following the reading of Padraig Pearse's revolutionary proclamation to the Irish people. 'For the first time,' we are told, Madden's 'mind had conceived an abstract idea that lit the fire of passion in his soul. Although the words he had heard were beyond his comprehension, their sound evoked the memory of all that had exalted him from childhood'.<sup>8</sup> Here we have a sense that the writer, too, invokes a similar passion or a raging fire or conflict within to express his inner self and feelings about the society around him, perhaps in the same way that emotions are produced in Pearse's political rhetoric: 'there are some things more horrible than bloodshed; and slavery is one of them'.<sup>9</sup> Yeats was correct, at least in this context, when he suggested that for the poet the quarrel is always with himself, whereas for the politician and revolutionary, it is so often with others.

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<sup>6</sup> Declan Kiberd, 'After the Revolution: O'Casey and O'Flaherty', *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Publications, 2000), p. 492.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in James M. Cahalan, *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p. 109, and reprinted from the *Irish Statesman* 5 (20 February 1926): 739-40, as article by O'Flaherty entitled: 'O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*: An Anti-Irish Play'. Although O'Flaherty had great admiration for the revolutionaries of 1916, he later reflected in *Two Years* that 'The Irish Rebellion of 1916, even though it was led by Connolly, one of the most profound of socialist thinkers, did not make any impression on me, because the issue there had been confused by the local racial antagonism between the English and the Irish', *Two Years* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *Insurrection* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1988), pp. 32-33. First edition published: London 1950.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Pearse, *The Coming Revolution: Political Writings of Patrick Pearse* (Dublin: Mercier, 2012) p. 99.



But what if the writer is also in conflict with the world around him, which is certainly the case with so many artists, particularly in twentieth-century Irish literature? The reaction or quarrel between the individual and his community would then suggest that the art form is concerned not merely with what Yeats calls 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul'; it also becomes a battle between the spiritual, inherent qualities of the artist and the public expectations he faces, whether political, religious or social, which the writer believes to be in direct conflict with his principles or personal beliefs.<sup>10</sup> As examples we shall later consider how writers such as Yeats, Shaw and O'Flaherty responded to particular forms of censorship in Ireland. What these protests tend to signify is that many Irish writers shared a common quarrel with the state or society in which they lived, which often manifested itself as a battle from within. The recognition of the struggle within the self, of finding purpose in the apparent confusion of existence, when weighed against the expectations of the present, surfaces prominently in O'Flaherty's fiction, particularly in early works such as *The Black Soul*, a pivotal text in the author's career and the subject of examination later in this chapter. What the author demonstrates in such novels is an investigation of a world inside the artist's mind which tries to come to terms with the nature of human existence from a moral or philosophical point of reference.

In *After Virtue* (1981), the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre recognises the difficulty of 'securing moral agreement' in our modern culture from the perspective

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<sup>10</sup> 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' (1933) is the title of one of Yeats' poems, exploring the poet's essential quarrel between body and soul, see *The Major Works*, pp. 122-124.

of any artist or individual. He insists that this problem is rooted in the fact that 'we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension' surrounding questions of morality or of that particular reference point which allows for rational interpretation of our world.<sup>11</sup> He argues that 'the language of morality' is in a state 'of grave disorder' because we possess only 'the fragments of a conceptual scheme' and it is therefore impossible to separate this 'crisis in moral language' from the particular historical or social processes which shaped it. MacIntyre believes that the confusion of 'moral argument', which is central to the way that we experience life in our own culture, is also relevant to writers and individuals living in the past. He argues:

We all too often still treat the moral philosophers of the past as contributors to a single debate with a relatively unvarying subject matter, treating Plato and Hume and Mill as contemporaries both of ourselves and of each other. This leads to an abstraction of these writers from the cultural and social milieus in which they lived and thought and so the history of their thought acquires a false independence from the rest of the culture.<sup>12</sup>

It is therefore injudicious to separate a writer from the culture or period in which he lives because the artist is forever in dialogue with the community around him. He further asserts:

Our capacity to use moral language, to be guided by moral reasoning, to define our transactions with others in moral terms is so central to our view of ourselves that even to envisage the possibility of our radical incapacity in these respects is to ask for a shift in our view of what we are and do

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<sup>11</sup> Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 3-9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-13.

which is going to be difficult to achieve [. . .] It is precisely because there is in our society no established way of deciding between claims [about morality] that moral argument appears to be necessarily interminable [. . .] For it is not only in arguments with others that we are reduced so quickly to assertion and counter-assertion; it is also in the arguments that we have within ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

For writers such as Liam O'Flaherty the obvious 'disorders of moral thought' and of science were present in the writings of his own time - in philosophers such as Nietzsche who recognised early in his career that the 'trust in life is gone: life itself has become a problem'.<sup>14</sup>

For a nineteenth-century audience the arguments were clearer still in the writings of Darwin who had recognised, through strict scientific analysis and observation, a world where we are all struggling for the survival or the preservation of the species. But for Nietzsche, although it was necessary to question whether there were any 'such things as "mind", reason, thought, consciousness, soul, will, or truth', it was also possible to transcend the 'gloom' and uncertainty of the present; to find 'a new happiness' where 'the love of life is still possible'.<sup>15</sup> He explains this process through the struggle to create new forms of knowledge in 'more spiritual,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-9.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich W. Nietzsche, 'Preface for the Second Edition', *The Gay Science* (1882), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, Random House, Inc., 1974), p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche's challenge to conventional views about selfhood and the soul as immaterial ('the fiction [. . .] that several similar states were the effect of one substratum') is open to interpretation because he is claiming a form of 'spiritual' or individual autonomy. For quotations, see *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, *The Will to Power* (1901), trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: Gordon Press, 1974), Vol II, Books II and IV, p. 15; and Nietzsche, 'Preface for the Second Edition', *The Gay Science*, p. 37.

more spiritualized men', or in what he terms the *Übermensch* or 'Superman'.<sup>16</sup> This may be interpreted not always as the philosopher intended, but for many it meant the pursuit of the more intellectual or artistic life over the conventionally religious one. Nietzsche advocated that '*the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience*'; views which are often shared by O'Flaherty who identifies in the public a 'merciless' or 'ogre' mentality, apparently uninterested in the soul of the artist.<sup>17</sup> The writer personally acknowledges that he does not 'understand Nietzsche', and describes him as 'a marvellous character [because he] must have had Irish blood in him'.<sup>18</sup> He admires the philosopher because his ideas appear to liberate the mind from the restrictions of the present by encouraging him to question his own identity and surroundings. O'Flaherty finds an explanation for the purpose of his existence through the art of writing, where the expression of the self and soul are defined as one inter-related process, which he confirms in one of his letters to Edward Garnett: 'I will write in future for the satisfaction of my own soul, since this to me is the most important thing in this world, or in the next either'.<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche's philosophy is employed to steer the artist's mind away from the interference of a dominant culture, towards the inner self: 'the light now - about how to write [about] the things

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<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 37. The *Übermensch* is explored in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (1883), trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1961), p. 44. Hollingdale uses the word 'Superman', whereas some translators, notably Walter Kaufmann, prefer 'overman'.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76. The inserted italics are Nietzsche's; *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 50. The original letter to Edward Garnett was written from the Hell-Fire Club, Rathfarnham on 2 May, 1924.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

one knows'.<sup>20</sup>

We have seen how the connection between the self and morality in works such as *Dubliners* highlights the importance of individual choice and moral responsibility in the quest for selfhood, that passionate desire for freedom to express one's inner beliefs. What we have not explored is the specific inner life of the artist and how this in many ways shapes a particular response to his environment. Joyce's early lecture on 'James Clarence Mangan' (1902) is a fine example of such an exploration, where he outlines how the essential 'sufferings' of the poet Mangan 'cast him inwards' into a place which 'for many ages the sad and the wise have elected to be'.<sup>21</sup> For Joyce, Mangan is the embodiment of art in general or, if not, then he is like every writer who appears in conflict with his community because for him 'the life of the poet [the artist] is intense' and the art of poetry 'is always a revolt against artifice, a revolt, in a sense, against actuality [. . .] as it is often found at war with its age'.<sup>22</sup>

O'Flaherty is rather like the tortured or struggling poet Mangan, who appears to be eternally 'at war' with his community, perhaps because of the major changes that were taking place in his society for much of his life. As a short story writer and novelist, he is forever battling inwardly to express himself through conflict with other writers and institutions and he achieves this effect mainly through powerful

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> James Joyce, 'James Clarence Mangan', *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, ed. Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 55-59.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

descriptive vocabulary, graphic imagery and metaphorical language. There is sometimes an explosive effect of vocabulary at work to highlight this inner tension at the beginning of a short story or novel, which often anticipates immediate or dramatic action. Opening lines such as 'the city machine guns and rifles broke the silence'; 'There was tense excitement within the open space'; or 'Night was falling. The sun was sinking into the sea', are brief examples of this in the short stories.<sup>23</sup> In the novels, O'Flaherty is not outwardly preoccupied with form and style in the way that a writer like Joyce is, mainly because he believes the pursuit of a given style is 'artificial and vulgar'.<sup>24</sup> For O'Flaherty 'a novel must offer something more than a perfect style'; it should appear as 'a relentless picture of life [which has] . . . the power to invoke great beauty or great horror in the same breath as it calls forth laughter from the lips'.<sup>25</sup> Art always involves a search for some form of spiritual transcendence beyond the ordinary which allows the writer space to explore human nature in its many traits and also come to terms with his own mercurial temperament and personality.

Most critics recognise the various tensions and passions which motivated O'Flaherty. Patrick Sheeran sees the writer's 'basic impulse' as a desire 'to flee life and society and the value system inherent in European civilisation. He will define himself not by reference to social norms but by opposing and standing [. . .] against

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<sup>23</sup> O'Flaherty, 'The Sniper', *Liam O'Flaherty's Short Stories: Volume 1*, p. 63; *Volume 2*, 'The Lost Thrush'; 'Trapped' (London: New English Library Ltd, 1966), p. 36-46.

<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Garnett on 2 April 1924, O'Flaherty declared: 'I have no style. I don't want any style. I refuse to have a style. I have no time for style. I think style is artificial and vulgar.'

<sup>25</sup> Selected from A.A. Kelly's *Liam O'Flaherty: The Storyteller*, p. 82. This quotation is from O'Flaherty's words in a book review, "Mr. Tasker's Gods", *Irish Statesman* 3 (7 March 1925): 827.

them'.<sup>26</sup> Hedda Freiberg asserts that his 'novels bristle with tensions and contradictions'.<sup>27</sup> It is my contention that O'Flaherty's art is not so much a desire to 'flee' as to challenge his community, and he draws on influences from a range of sources, both from within and outside of Ireland's borders. His writing has a serious bearing on modern concepts of the self and community in Ireland because he confronts both the realities of violence within his community (something still prevalent in Ireland today) and makes a determined effort to define his society and his particular role as an artist within it.

Born on the largest of the Aran Islands in 1896, O'Flaherty's early life was a crucible of conflict witnessed in the harsh impoverished conditions of experiences at home. Sheeran informs us that O'Flaherty's upbringing was caught between the softer, intellectual story-telling of his mother as part of a 'seanchas' (*seanchai*) tradition and his extremely nationalistic and rebellious father who influenced his sons to become involved in political revolution and to join the Communist Party. He suggests that the writer grew up in 'a broken world [where] folk culture was beginning to disintegrate and the shaping forces within the society were incapable of establishing an alternative. Provincial rootedness was everywhere giving way before a rising, ruthless middle class. The broken world scarred the boy and young man'.<sup>28</sup>

The extent to which O'Flaherty was somehow shaped by this 'broken world' and the

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<sup>26</sup> Patrick Sheeran, *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty: A Study in Romantic Realism* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1976), p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Hedda Freiberg, *An Old Order and A New: The Split World of Liam O'Flaherty's Novels* (Stockholm: Uppsala University, 1996), p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Sheeran, *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty*, pp. 42-55.

later effects of war and violence on his personality is considered by Sheeran. Deborah Averill elaborates on this argument, stressing that O'Flaherty's conflict involved his 'dislike of the commercial life of towns' over his love of 'the traditional life of Aran', instilling in him 'a sense of an irreconcilably divided culture'.<sup>29</sup>

Other critics have questioned the legitimacy of some of O'Flaherty's claims in autobiographical accounts which support Sheeran and Averill's theories.<sup>30</sup> P. A. Doyle suggests that the author's views are often inconsistent because his 'memory is not reliable . . . [and he] is by nature too much the servant of whims and moods which continually change without logic or consistency'.<sup>31</sup> James M. Cahalan also maintains that the writer is motivated 'by a set of interrelated, unresolved, often contradictory tensions'.<sup>32</sup> O'Flaherty's personality vacillates between emotions of discord and feelings of depression, to gentle harmony and a passionate view of his art where he expresses the intensity of the artistic experience, a feeling which he sustains for most of his adult life. He embraces personal expression as a primarily positive experience in the face of life's trials and tribulations or the more pessimistic aspects of despair which sometimes overshadow his work, the belief that 'nihilism

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<sup>29</sup> Deborah M. Averill, 'Liam O'Flaherty', *The Irish Short Story from George Moore to Frank O'Connor* (Boston: University Press of America, Inc., 1982), p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> O'Flaherty describes how his mother 'would gather us about the hearth and weave fantastic stories about giants and fairies, or more often the comic adventures of our neighbours', *Shame the Devil* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981), p. 18. This tends to support Sheeran's account of the maternal influence.

<sup>31</sup> P. A. Doyle, 'An Irish Version of the Byronic Hero', *Liam O' Flaherty* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1971), pp. 19-22.

<sup>32</sup> James M. Cahalan, 'Introduction: The Life and the Issues', *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction*, p. 3.



remained [O'Flaherty's] most enduring view of the human condition'.<sup>33</sup>

Both feelings surface in *Shame the Devil* (1934), although there is a sense that the assessment of art is nearly always congenial:

A poet must understand the truth before he can create poetry, but he must forget it before he can release the energy necessary to sing his song. In other words, he must love what he is going to write, and yet the love must be so intense and so full of fire that it lacks all sense, both of possession and responsibility. It is a lust rather than that spiritual love of which the priest and nuns, of Christianity and of emasculated literature, preach to us about.<sup>34</sup>

There are parallels with Joyce's views on art here both in the writer's reaction to organised religion and in the notion of poetry as a kind of fire or 'love' which is 'intense' and which reflects 'the truth of its own being'.<sup>35</sup> For Joyce it becomes 'the spirit which proceeds out of truth and beauty [which] is the holy spirit of joy'.<sup>36</sup> The focus on a kind of spontaneity which 'lacks all sense' is notably in contrast to Joyce's more 'refined' and 'polished' dedication to form and structure in art which he borrowed from Flaubert.<sup>37</sup> O'Flaherty, like Wordsworth, focuses primarily on

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<sup>33</sup> Patrick Sheeran, *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 68.

<sup>34</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil*, p. 242.

<sup>35</sup> James Joyce, 'James Clarence Mangan', *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Dedalus' frequently quoted assertion that the artist is 'refined out of existence' is influenced by Flaubert's statement in a letter to Madame Louise Colet, 9 December 1852, where he describes how the artist 'does not judge' and becomes 'like a God in nature, present everywhere, but nowhere visible', ed. & trans Francis Steegmuller, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1830-1857*, 1 (Harvard, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 173.

‘powerful feelings’, fulfilling the Yeatsian assertion ‘that what moves natural men in the arts is what moves them in life, and that is, intensity of personal life’.<sup>38</sup>

This chapter examines a selection of O’Flaherty’s novels, short stories and autobiographical writings, offering fresh insight into his unique contributions to Irish literature and culture in the Free State. The study begins with a consideration of the historical context of his writing and an account of the important influences on O’Flaherty’s personal life and art, all of which helped to shape his creative output. His literature is significant because he is the only writer in this study who actively fought in the Irish Civil War, and he is also one of the first writers of the new generation to witness directly the origins and aftermath of this violent period. His life and art are pivotal in coming to terms with how the Irish experience is explored in a new and challenging form of fiction, influenced by a European realist tradition and a literary culture connected to the periodicals and organisations of his time. This literature illustrates the essential transition and tensions between a traditional romantic style of writing, initiated by poets such as Yeats and AE, and one which was more prepared to embrace the physical and spiritual realities of Irish life, leading to a modern understanding of the self and community in Ireland. For this reason, it is necessary to begin by questioning how the author was influenced by the social and political forces of his time.

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<sup>38</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘Discoveries’, *Essays and Introductions* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1981), p. 265.

## Modern Ireland: the quarrel between self and community

The question of why there were so many diverse styles of writing that came out of Ireland in the period after 1890 might possibly be explained by the eruption of violence and instability in the country, as Yeats himself reflected in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War': 'only an aching heart/Conceives a changeless work of art'.<sup>39</sup> In the period which followed the 1916 Easter Rising Yeats responded passionately to such conflict, and in his poem 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' describes how the 'days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare/Rides upon sleep', invoking shocking images of 'a drunken soldiery' responsible for leaving a 'mother, murdered at her door' and crawling 'in her own blood'.<sup>40</sup> The poet feels it his duty to respond to this violence and he is not alone in that need to express the 'aching heart' of the Irish writer. The work of art is born out of such conflict within society and, to a greater extent, is shaped by it because the artist is forced to respond or react to his surroundings or risk the inevitability of oblivion through silence. Both Yeats and Joyce were well aware of the political climate around them, each having their own personal views on Home Rule and Irish independence. This intoxication with the relationship between writer and political surroundings passed from preceding artists to succeeding generations, now searching for new and decisive illustrations of their society, in a literature which tried to come to terms with what O'Flaherty called 'the tumult of the army on the march'.

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<sup>39</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works*, p. 103.

<sup>40</sup> Yeats, 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', *The Major Works*, p. 108.

The generation of writers which emerged after Yeats and Joyce (notably artists like O'Flaherty, Kavanagh and Kate O'Brien), had to contend firstly with the reality of working within the shadow of two great literary artists who had, in effect, shaped or created a modern definition of what Ireland was, in terms of its history, community and relationship to the rest of the world. In this sense the literature of Yeats and Joyce acted as a blueprint for the understanding of Irish culture and community within their own lifetimes and tended to overshadow much of the writing which followed. The initial problem facing the next generation concerned how to project an image of art which was in some way original, a personal style that expressed a sense of literary continuity as well as a projection of a new sense of artistic self and community.

There was one clear fact in the mind of the artist living before Ireland's independence: the dreams and aspirations of the revolutionaries of 1916 would never be fulfilled within the contemporary social and political climate. The year of the rebellion was pivotal in marking the beginning of a new epoch in Irish and British history where the future was to be one of discord rather than harmony. The 'symbolic status' of the rebels which effectively led to 'the foundation of the nation' produced, according to David Lloyd, 'not reconciliation but a troubled tension' due to the violence and loss of life in the 'transformation' to independence.<sup>41</sup> Aaron Kelly claims that 'the actions of the 1916 rebels became nationally symbolic [where they

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<sup>41</sup> David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press Ltd, 1993), p. 71.

were] transformed in their actions into symbols of a new Irish nation [. . .] at the moment of their death'.<sup>42</sup> The inevitable result was one of change or fragmentation in the political and social fabric of society, 'an irreconcilable tension of double or competing meanings [in] a newly constituted Ireland that [. . .] entered history and asserted its continuity, identity and futurity on an act of rupture'.<sup>43</sup>

The 'act of rupture' in Ireland was not just in the failure to achieve political freedom in 1916; it was in the constant reminder of past failures to achieve self-governance, national unity and stability in language. The Irish writer's need to express was always through the lens of a culture which had been scarred by centuries of colonisation which, to use the words of the schoolmaster Hugh O'Donnell in Brian Friel's *Translations*, could only lead to a sense of displacement, where the civilisation becomes 'imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . fact'.<sup>44</sup> Edward Said expresses this from a postcolonial perspective: 'For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must therefore be searched for and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination'.<sup>45</sup>

The instinctual feeling that English 'couldn't really express' Irish culture and

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<sup>42</sup> Aaron Kelly, *Twentieth-Century Irish Literature: A reader's guide to essential criticism* (London: Macmillan, 2008), p.65.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 43.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 271.

mentality was very clear to both Yeats and Joyce.<sup>46</sup> They each sought to translate this linguistic confusion into a new expression of Irishness, regardless of the complexity and confusion of Irish history. If anything, it was not an ignoble thing to illustrate the facts and realities of the culture: the various mythologies and folklore or the concrete experiences of life in Dublin were important, perhaps because the need to express identity is stronger in nations which are in the process of change or are somehow displaced through social and political confusion. In this assessment there was always the prospect of looking forward to something new, something different: to political independence or the recognition of the plurality of culture in general. The problem for writers such as Liam O'Flaherty was that the historical and cultural disruption to Irish life did not end when the country finally became independent in 1921; the sense of instability and oppression continued post-independence, creating inner conflict, anger, disillusionment and frustration within the mind of the artist so that the urge to release such feelings, to give birth to the nation's 'energy', appeared like the intensity of an 'unchained storm'.

One probable reason for the development of great art prior to Irish independence may have been the psychological or instinctive awareness of transition in the midst of cultural revitalisation. The emergence, for example, of the Gaelic League and political or cultural organisations such as the IRB or Ireland's National Theatre, envisaged a revival in the Irish language, the forging of a new

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<sup>46</sup> Brian Friel, *Translations*, p. 25.

independent Republic or a way of using art and literature as a medium through which to engage or communicate with the Irish population. Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) is one such example of how literature in the theatre was used to convey powerful messages which encouraged strong patriotic feelings and reactions in Irish society in connection with current affairs, regardless of the fact that the poet was viewed as an outsider by the very people he sought to represent or influence on the public stage.

In truth there were two very different interpretations of Ireland emerging at this time. Willard Potts claims that 'the Irish Revival, like much else in the country developed a Protestant side and a Catholic side'.<sup>47</sup> Here Yeats can be seen as 'the 'leading spokesman' for the Protestant Revival, whose purpose was to return to 'some finer life in the past', a romantic age where peasant and aristocrat shared a harmonious relationship.<sup>48</sup> Catholic nationalist editors such as D.P. Moran in *The Leader* and Arthur Griffith in *The United Irishman* represented a direct challenge to Yeats' interpretation of Ireland and even to Douglas Hyde's impression of a cultural revival in the Irish language which would remain strictly apolitical. Moran and Griffith alternatively focused on a new militant form of 'Irish Irelandism', viewing modern Ireland as exclusively Catholic, in reaction against the influence of Ascendancy, European 'cosmopolitanism' and British imperialism. In this tense political climate, writers such as Yeats and O'Flaherty felt compelled to respond

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<sup>47</sup> Willard Potts, *Joyce and the Two Irelands* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), pp. 24-27.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

passionately and imaginatively to their surroundings because the energy and vitality of the moment demanded it. The literature which then emerged was a reaction to the confusion and uncertainty of the times, a way of coming to terms with the prevailing tensions or questions about Irish cultural identity.

What could not be foreseen at this time was the prospect of Partition: an essential division between North and South, which could only result in further violence and political disagreement. The very notion of dividing the country was inconceivable to the majority of people then living on the island. Seán O'Faoláin recognised that the 'idea seemed incongruous, shameful and a base betrayal', echoing the Republican view that the Treaty represented 'the negation of everything' they had fought for in the War of Independence, although he was loathe to regret the experience because 'its conflicts gave [him] something to mull over and write about'.<sup>49</sup>

As far back as 1875 it had seemed to Charles Stewart Parnell during his maiden speech in the House of Commons, that Ireland was 'not a geographical fragment but a nation', regardless of the conflicting nature of class, religion and the prevailing land question.<sup>50</sup> Parnell appeared as the spokesman for a new form of political nationalism and, in his premature downfall and early death, acted as precursor to the sacrificial martyrdom of the 1916 rebels. His life and career became

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<sup>49</sup> First reference: reputed to be the words of the Republican Dan Breen, cited in Robert Kee, *Ireland: A History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, revised edition 2003), p. 192. Second reference: Seán O'Faoláin, *Vive Moi! An Autobiography* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd, 1965), pp. 147-150.

<sup>50</sup> Citation selected from Robert Kee, *Ireland: A History*, p. 119.



a powerful symbol in the quest for Irish political unity in his ultimate conquest of a public self, in the same way perhaps that Yeats or Joyce became potent opposites in the liberation of the inner artist battling the 'heroic nightmare' of history.<sup>51</sup>

How then did the emerging artists after Yeats and Joyce respond to living in a divided country? Partition formed a crossroads in Irish history: one that was apparently psychological as well as geographical in its division of Irish culture and society. Both citizen and artist, now striving for a sense of personal, artistic or political autonomy, became somehow divided in allegiances between the individual (the self) and the State, evident in both the literature of the period and the political rhetoric of the times. Austin Clarke and F. R. Higgins shared O'Flaherty's sentiments of 'the wild tumult', collectively supporting the 'unchained storm', which might reflect the 'primal emotions' and 'Passionate events' of the period, declaring that their generation should remain 'unashamed of its modern unrest'.<sup>52</sup> For the playwright Sean O'Casey the turbulence of events such as Easter 1916 or the War of Independence symbolised a betrayal of socialist principles which saw people 'dyin' for the gunmen' in the midst of abject violence and poverty.<sup>53</sup> He also viewed Partition as a mere social transformation in the scramble for hegemony, as the old

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<sup>51</sup> Yeats viewed Ireland in heroic terms whereas Joyce asserted through Stephen Dedalus that 'History [. . .] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake', *Ulysses*, ed. Declan Kiberd (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 42. David Lloyd further suggests: 'If the poet represents the nation he prefigures, so the martyr in his death identifies utterly with the nation to which he appeals', *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*, p. 70.

<sup>52</sup> F.R. Higgins and Austin Clarke, 'Art and Energy', *The Irish Statesman*, Oct. 1924, cited in Zneimer, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> The words of the character Seumas in *The Shadow of a Gunman*, cited in *Three Plays by Sean O'Casey* (London: MacMillan, 1972), p. 111.

English ruling elite found itself replaced by a new Irish one, a country in which the people would continue to suffer 'agen the stupidity o' men!'<sup>54</sup> George Bernard Shaw believed the problem to be deeply ingrained in the Irish psyche: there was nothing the people dreaded more than political liberty because, having achieved their freedom, they were soon destined 'to enslave' themselves.<sup>55</sup>

It has often been argued that following the signing of the Treaty, Ireland became 'one of the most conservative states in Europe', a theocracy in all but name and dominated by powerful clerical figures who urged that any individual or body challenging the established doctrines of Catholicism would not be welcome in the country.<sup>56</sup> There is also the question of what alternative form of culture could have been created out of the dilemma of geographical fragmentation. The new leaders had to prove the Free State worthy of governance in a form acceptable to how the Irish viewed themselves from within and this reality convinced them that in order to establish a new self-image and purpose they needed to break away from the dominant influences of British culture and imperialism.

The new focus for Ireland was on 'a distinctive Irish cultural identity, particularly one distinct from English influence [. . .] defined as exclusively Gaelic, [with] a consequent suspicion of the tradition of Irish writing in English, especially

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<sup>54</sup> Sean O'Casey, 'Juno and the Paycock,' *Three Plays by Sean O'Casey*, p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> Shaw's comments read: 'It is a convention to assume that there is nothing people like more than political liberty. As a matter of fact there is nothing they dread more. Under the feeble and apologetic tyranny of Dublin Castle we Irish were forced to endure a considerable degree of compulsory freedom. The moment we got rid of that tyranny we rushed to enslave ourselves', *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and The Irish Writer*, ed. Julia Carlson (London: Routledge, 1990 by Article 19), p. 133.

<sup>56</sup> Reported to be the words of Kevin O'Higgins, Minister for Justice in the Free State government, cited in F. S. L Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), pp. 91-92.

the work of the Anglo-Irish'.<sup>57</sup> In such circumstances, all artists were to witness a complex political and cultural climate which became increasingly authoritarian in its response to any individual prepared to challenge the new social and political order. Joyce personally commented on the irony of the situation when he informed his friend Arthur Power in Paris that artistic freedom was more prevalent in the Ireland of his youth. His reasons were that the people at that time, conscious that they were subject to colonial rule, felt free from 'social responsibility' and therefore appeared more willing to express who they were.<sup>58</sup>

After independence, tensions were exacerbated by the isolationist position of the writer who received little or no support from either the general public or the State. This was noted by Liam O'Flaherty on his return to the country in 1924, after some two years of self-exile. Writing to his publisher and mentor Edward Garnett, O'Flaherty complained: 'I could sell everything I write for the next two years in Dublin within twenty-four hours, but all I could get would be a guinea a thousand. They pay for politics in this country but they refuse to pay for literature'.<sup>59</sup> It seemed for Irish writers now living in the Free State that their worst fears had been confirmed: 'the arts had failed' or at least those who 'cared deeply about the arts' had become 'the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith'.<sup>60</sup> Literature seemed to emerge as a response to environment and cultural background, shaped by the

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<sup>57</sup> Gregory A. Schirmer, *Out of What Began: A History of Irish Poetry in English* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 267.

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 265.

<sup>59</sup> O'Flaherty, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 76.

<sup>60</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Ireland and the Arts', *Ideas of Good and Evil* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), p. 320.

revolutionary period which helped to forge an image of the nation itself (which later became synonymous with the life of the artist). The conflict was between the writer's personal self or inner beliefs and the expectations and challenges he faced in conforming to societal expectations, engendered within the political and religious framework of his community.

Modern Ireland would be no place for an artist willing to speak his mind, to express what he felt or believed, which may or may not result in a challenge to the powerfully religious nature of his environment, a world now dominated by politicians who remained loyal and subservient to the Catholic Church. This lack of freedom to write or publish what one sincerely believed had a serious impact on the state of mind of the emerging writer. Consider Yeats' reaction to the Censorship of Publications Act (1929). This is present within the literary archives, evident for example in the original minute book of The Irish Academy of Letters. Here the first official meeting is recorded on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1932, during which George Bernard Shaw appears as President and W. B. Yeats is listed as Vice President. In this document both writers 'collectively' outline the aims of the new Academy and its opposition to the Censorship Bill in a letter addressed to various 'academicians' and writers, including James Joyce and Douglas Hyde. They begin:

There is in Ireland an official censorship possessing, and actively exercising, powers of suppression which may at any moment confine an Irish author to the British and American market and thereby make it impossible for him to live by distinctive Irish literature [. . .] our sole defence lies in the authority of our utterance [. . .] for in Ireland there is still a deep respect for intellectual and poetic quality [. . .] but we cannot exercise our influence unless we have an

organ through which we can address the public, or appeal collectively and unanimously to the Government. We must therefore found an *Academy of Belles Lettres*. Will you give us your name as one of the founder members? <sup>61</sup>

When Shaw and Yeats outline that their 'sole defence lies in the authority of [their] utterance' it is clear that they share common 'grievances' or complaints about the restrictions placed on the poet or artist at this time. The emphasis on 'utterance' is in the power of their literature to convey what they honestly believe; the inherent truth about themselves and their society. The 'deep respect for intellectual and poetic quality' is under threat from the political forces dominant in the new state.

One of the nineteen founder members of the Irish Academy of Letters was Liam O'Flaherty, although the records show that he is not listed in attendance during any meeting.<sup>62</sup> The irony is that one of O'Flaherty's novels of the period, *The House of Gold*, was the first book banned by the Irish Censorship of Publications Board in 1930. A friend of the novelist and fellow writer, Francis Stuart, once suggested in an interview in 1988 that O'Flaherty was not particularly interested in the fight against censorship. He claims: 'it was Yeats who sprung it on us that we had been elected to this Academy and neither of us wanted to be elected'.<sup>63</sup> This is to ignore the effect of censorship on the author's career because the restrictive nature of

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<sup>61</sup> Typescript of letter printed in the original Minute Book of the Irish Academy of Letters in *Special Collections* at the James Joyce Library, University College Dublin.

<sup>62</sup> O'Flaherty is not listed in attendance at any of the meetings, according to the Minute Book of the Irish Academy of Letters in *Special Collections*, University College Dublin.

<sup>63</sup> Francis Stuart's interview took place on 18<sup>th</sup> October 1988, cited in Hedda Freiberg, *An Old Order and A New: The Split World of Liam O'Flaherty's Novels* (Stockholm: Uppsala University, 1996), p. 19. Paradoxically, in an interview in 1946 O'Flaherty declared: 'I agree with censorship, but not as it is worked here. Ban books in bad taste; ban the filthy and the vulgar, but be very careful not to ban literature', published as "Irish Revival Delights Liam O'Flaherty", *Irish Press* on 13th May 1946.

life in Ireland at this time is mentioned in O'Flaherty's letters to Garnett. In one of his earliest accounts after returning to Ireland from abroad, he describes how 'The streets are dirty. Everybody is badly dressed, impudent, contemptuous and surly, and yet there is a freshness about even the dirt of the streets and the surliness of the man from whom one buys a tram ticket that is immeasurably preferable to the smug politeness and devilish immovability of the Londoner and the Englishman at large'.<sup>64</sup> The author's ambivalence towards Irish life is here apparent, even though he harbours serious reservations about how the country is being governed on his return. One of his most damning critiques of censorship in Ireland relates to the influence of the Catholic Church over the life of the individual, apparent during O'Flaherty's visit to a small town in County Kerry in 1932. He writes of this experience:

In my work I have been forced to hold up a mirror to life as I found it in my country. And, of necessity, the mirror shows the dung about the pretty altars. So a censorship has been imposed on my work, since it is considered sacrilegious by the Irish Church that I should object to the sordid filth around the altars. The tyranny of the Irish Church and its associate parasites, the upstart bourgeoisie, the last posthumous child from the wrinkled womb of European capitalism, maintains itself by the culture of dung, superstition and ignoble poverty among the masses. And the censorship of literature was imposed, lest men like me could teach the Irish masses that contact with dung is demoralizing, that ignorance is ignoble and that poverty, instead of being a passport to Heaven, makes this pretty earth a monotonous Hell.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> O'Flaherty, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 72.

<sup>65</sup> O'Flaherty, 'Censorship in Ireland', quoted in ed. James M. Cahalan, *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction*, p.118. Reprinted from "The Irish Censorship," *American Spectator* 1 (November 1932): 2.

Here we find the ardent Communist and humanitarian ideals of the writer. The author outlines his quarrel in various guises: the Church, poverty and a universal system of values which denies 'the desire for civilization and freedom in the breasts of their wretched victims'.<sup>66</sup> O'Flaherty's 'mirror to life' is one that examines the social and physical realities of the world around him and in this sense he could be viewed as a realist writer who urges his readers to examine their surroundings with a critical eye. The interest in French authors such as Maupassant, his distinct reaction against literary cliques and the pursuit of a given style might otherwise suggest that he did not see himself as part of any particular artistic group or movement. What one critic has said of Patrick Kavanagh is also true of O'Flaherty: he appears as a 'crusader against untruth', forever in conflict with the political and social realities of his community.<sup>67</sup>

### **The Irish influence on O'Flaherty's "style": Yeats, Joyce and the new generation**

Liam O'Flaherty was the first of a new generation of Irish writers in the wake of Yeats' Celtic Revival to confront the emerging violence erupting both at home and in Europe. This 'passionate intensity' in art and life was shared by many young writers, including Frank O'Connor, Seán O'Faoláin, Peadar O'Donnell and Ernie O'Malley, whose direct experiences of violence were in contrast to the romance and mystical

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews describes Kavanagh as 'the self-appointed crusader against untruth', 'Life and Work: The Poetics of Sincerity', ed. Stan Smith, *Irish Writers in their Time: Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 21.

influences of Yeats, AE (George Russell) and Lady Gregory. The new emerging artists captured the memory of active involvement in political revolution, translating or purging such conflict in published articles, fiction and poetry, some of which appeared in literary periodicals such as *To-morrow* (1924), *Ireland To-day* (1936-1938) or *The Bell* (1940-1954). The form and style of this literature both challenged and continued the artistic legacy of writers like Yeats and Joyce, whilst also breaking with this tradition, so as to chart new and unexplored territory in efforts to define a new nation and community.

Frank Shovlin has supported the latter claim by arguing that where British magazines of the 1920s were mainly preoccupied with 'issues of an aesthetic nature, Irish magazines in the same period had the task of questioning identity, of attempting not just to uncover new talent or to set the artistic tone, but to define the culture of a new nation'.<sup>68</sup> It was through publication in literary periodicals such as *To-Morrow* and *The Dublin Magazine* that O'Flaherty came to prominence as a writer in Irish society, viewing them as 'a useful tool to gather about him a school of like-minded geniuses to assist him in his rise to the top'.<sup>69</sup> Beginning in 1923, he submitted short stories to various editors in England and Ireland, receiving favourable reviews from notable writers and critics, such as Yeats, AE and L. K. Emery (pseudonym of A. J. Leventhal). The latter's review of O'Flaherty's *The Black*

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<sup>68</sup> Frank Shovlin, 'From Revolution to Republic: Magazines, Modernism, and Modernity in Ireland', *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, Vol I, Britain and Ireland 1880-1955, ed. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 736-745.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.



*Soul* draws attention to the inner conflict within the writer and the Russian influences on his style and aesthetic.<sup>70</sup>

The author's close association with Yeats and Joyce in formulating his art and consciousness must not be overlooked. The direct link to Yeats is in the desire to unleash or to some extent resolve the conflict within; in the recognition of how civilisations develop ('all things fall and are built again'), and most significantly in the need to draw on the opposite aspects of one's nature to express the individual and his community, where, in O'Flaherty's own words, 'force becomes the opposite of sluggishness' and 'motion is the opposite of death'.<sup>71</sup> The necessity to forge his own antithetical vision and understanding of 'self', the opposite to his Dublin life and the community he knew in the Aran Islands, is exemplified in the artist's desire to leave his home, to wander the world and settle for some time in England, a culture which he admired and considered in letters to Garnett to be more 'civilised' than Ireland.<sup>72</sup> And yet the author was always drawn back to his Irish roots, writing like Joyce out of the only world that he knew: in O'Flaherty's case the exploration of rural Irish experience and man's relationship with his natural environment fused with the harsh realities of life amid the violence and conflict of urban Dublin which we find in novels such as *The Informer* and *Insurrection*.

O'Flaherty was indeed vehement in his criticism of his community,

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<sup>70</sup> L.K. Emery, 'A Primitive', *To-morrow*, Vol. 1. No. 1 August 1924, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Lapis Lazuli', *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works*, p. 153; O'Flaherty, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 106.

<sup>72</sup> O'Flaherty writes to his mentor Edward Garnett on 3 April, 1924: 'what is happening in the civilised world, which is of course across the channel', *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 82.

particularly in his relationship with fellow artists such as Yeats and the Irish literary movement, on more than one occasion writing about his desire to form 'a powerful clique' of his own so that he can 'lick the bunch of them'.<sup>73</sup> He makes it very clear in numerous instances that he is his own person and has no desire to pander to other artists, often thinking of the 'literary people' who surround AE and Yeats in derogatory terms.<sup>74</sup> His quarrel is not only with the lack of freedom apparent in Irish life after independence, it is also with a particular literary mentality which denies expression 'from the heart', a feature which to O'Flaherty always carries with it 'the hallmark of genuineness'.<sup>75</sup> He does have something in common with the generation of artists who follow him in this respect, writers such Patrick Kavanagh or Frank O'Connor, who each appear in reaction against Yeats' distinctly romanticized view of Irish life, in pursuit of a particular 'poetics of sincerity' or a form of fiction which appeals directly to the reader on a personal or an emotional level.<sup>76</sup> Kavanagh believed that great art would result in a spiritual state where 'we [both writer and readers] are satisfied with being ourselves, however small'.<sup>77</sup> O'Connor, a life-long critic of censorship and the new governing forces emerging in the Free State, was also adamant that the individual and the self were paramount in the expression of modern Irish literature, advocating that 'a man's full individuality must be

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>74</sup> As expressed in O'Flaherty's letter to Garnett 21 March, 1924.

<sup>75</sup> Letter to Garnett, 12 March, 1924, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 75.

<sup>76</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews uses this term to define Kavanagh's art in 'Life and Work: The Poetics of Sincerity', ed. Stan Smith, *Irish Writers in their Time: Patrick Kavanagh*, pp. 21-38.

<sup>77</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Prose* (Worcester and London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), p. 21.

expressed and that to me is the centre, wherever a man can express his individuality'.<sup>78</sup>

O'Flaherty, like Kavanagh and O'Connor, believed passionately in the inner life of the artist, but his hostile opinion towards fellow writers was not shared by either AE or Yeats, both of whom recognised in the author's fiction a sense of continuity relating to the Irish experience, a vitality which could not be separated from his own inner feelings and experiences as an artist. Yeats identifies in O'Flaherty's writing the linguistic dilemma of a life rooted in a distinctively Gaelic language and culture on the Aran Islands, where 'the past is always alive', and is then suddenly displaced through the encroachment and dominance of an English language and culture. The poet is naturally willing to recognise the 'hatred' torturing the 'love' from within the artist, and vice versa.<sup>79</sup> Alternatively, in AE's estimation, O'Flaherty had more in common with artists such as Joyce and O'Casey, in his determination to move away from 'the most idealistic literature in Europe' towards a form of realism which explored 'the slums of our cities, the slums of the soul'.<sup>80</sup>

In O'Flaherty's fiction there is evidence of a private and a public battle: the need to come to terms with a particular culture which often appears in conflict with the emotional needs and artistic expression of the artist. In the character of Mr

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<sup>78</sup> Frank O'Connor in a documentary for RTE entitled 'The Lonely Voice' (2003), Director: Pat Collins.

<sup>79</sup> Yeats' quotation from 'A General Introduction for my Work' illustrates the contradiction of a mind shaped by an English literary culture but distinctively Irish in memory and tradition, so that 'No people hate as we do in whom the past is always alive', cited in W. B. Yeats: *The Major Works*, pp. 384-385.

<sup>80</sup> Y.O. (AE), *The Irish Statesman*, June 2th 1927, cited in Zneimer's *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty*, pp. 18-19.

Gilhooley he illustrates this psychological battle through an individual's lustful fantasies and spiritual despair, struggling with 'the misery of his life, the hopelessness of his future' and a withdrawal into the self as a consequence of the 'lonely' alienation of his urban environment.<sup>81</sup> Gilhooley is a character who longs, almost in the Joycean sense, to escape from his surroundings. He dreams of 'settling in the country and changing his whole life . . . [where he can] smell the summer, hawthorn bushes in bloom and the heavy perfume of clover fields', much as O'Flaherty successfully isolated himself in the Wicklow mountains in order to write his fiction.<sup>82</sup> The author learns from Yeats and Joyce that he must base his writing on the central contradictions of Irish life by striving for creative distance, harbouring strong feelings of isolation from the multitude, as he proclaims in one of his autobiographies: 'Crave forgiveness? Clip the wings of my fancies in order to win the favour of the mob? [. . .] Better to be devoured by the darkness than be hauled by dolts into an inferior light'.<sup>83</sup> In another instance he describes how he 'loathes the multitude, except as a spectacle to be watched'.<sup>84</sup>

The anger raging within the mind of the artist must always be examined in connection with the nature of life at home during the early years of the revolution because this ultimately affected the form and direction of the author's art. O'Flaherty's first published short story was entitled 'The Sniper' (1923), something

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<sup>81</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *Mr Gilhooley* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1991), pp. 30-32.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>83</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981), p. 23.

<sup>84</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *I Went to Russia* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), p. 25.

which drew him to the attention of Garnett and his future publisher Jonathan Cape.<sup>85</sup> The story is brought to life through the author's lyrical style and realism. The events are a poignant reminder of the consequences of civil war in any society; in this case in the convincing portrayal of a Republican sniper who kills a Free State soldier only to learn that the victim was his own brother. A. A. Kelly asserts that 'The Sniper' was written 'shortly after the Four Courts Rebellion in which O'Flaherty took part on behalf of the Republicans'.<sup>86</sup> It may be seen as an effort on the part of the author to release the evident tensions within his own mind: to extricate those feelings of discontent he experienced from within as 'a lean man with terrified, furtive eyes [. . .] with a revolver strapped between his shoulder-blades'.<sup>87</sup> And yet it was in the effort to find or in some way come to terms with his inner self that O'Flaherty took up arms in Dublin: a fact supported by critics such as John Zneimer, who see the author's interests as profoundly personal and artistic rather than merely political.<sup>88</sup>

Fiction gave O'Flaherty a medium through which to explore strong feelings about politics and human nature; it was certainly an art born out of the quarrel with others which became concentrated on conquering the dilemma of inner thoughts and personal frustrations, a need which could not be expressed simply or concisely in the refined poetry of a writer such as Yeats. The tensions within O'Flaherty were

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<sup>85</sup> 'It was the short story that first attracted the attention of Edward Garnett to him as a promising young writer and hence his recommendation of the novel', George Jefferson, *Liam O'Flaherty: A Descriptive Bibliography of his Works* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1993), p. 60.

<sup>86</sup> A. A. Kelly, *Liam O'Flaherty: The Storyteller* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 27.

<sup>87</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981), p. 34.

<sup>88</sup> John Zneimer contends that O'Flaherty's 'concern is always personal', *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 46.

different and perhaps more complex than those of the poet, so that the short story and novel became the predominant literary forms suitable to his style and taste. He disagreed with Seán O'Faoláin's contention that 'a thinly composed' or 'an unshaped society' such as Ireland offered only 'subjects for little pieces, that is for the short-story writer', and felt that his own dramatic and itinerant lifestyle offered sufficient scope for a greater exploration of the novel form.<sup>89</sup> Neither Yeats nor Joyce took an active part in the brutal realities of armed conflict as he had done, although Joyce's hectic lifestyle and inner feelings of resentment towards the oppressive nature of politics and religion were profound enough to create an epical work of fiction.

O'Flaherty's personal war contrasts with Joyce's in this sense: he does not ground his fiction within an urban setting which appears in revolt against specific religious or political institutions. True, he expresses a particular quarrel with the role of the Church and clerical influence in the life of the individual at home, as is evident in his political satire *A Tourist's Guide to Ireland* (1929), where he advocates that the parish priest (among others) 'is practically master of the body and soul of every individual' in the country.<sup>90</sup> O'Flaherty's writing alternatively seeks to explore other territories beyond the metropolis, a world where he can sense 'the murmur of the sea through the window' and master 'that peace beyond understanding which infects the soul as the result of perfect communion with other souls'.<sup>91</sup> The striving is

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<sup>89</sup> 'The Dilemma of Irish Letters', *Month*, 2, 6 (December 1949), 366–79, cited in Joe Cleary, 'Distress Signals: Sean O'Faolain and the Fate of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature', *Field Day Review* (2009), p. 62.

<sup>90</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *A Tourist's Guide to Ireland* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998), p. 19.

<sup>91</sup> O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil*, p. 227.

for resolution and contentment in expressing the truth about oneself and so the author's rage is set against a universal system in its many aspects: whether this appears as the 'capitalist finance [which] has completed its enslavement of mankind', the 'grovelling' and 'spineless horde' of writers who are in servitude to a mob mentality or the individual who remains couched in the fear of church and secular authority and therefore in denial of self-expression.<sup>92</sup>

As an outlet the author embraces revolutionary principles and forces of change which, like Joyce, are designed to liberate and inspire the artist to create out of the smithy of his own soul a response to the reality of his surroundings and personal feelings. It was the desire, as he once wrote, 'to bring a new beauty into the consciousness of man' more than the urge to change society internally which prompted the writer's interest in Communism and drove him to the extremes of active participation in armed conflict.<sup>93</sup> His art, in effect, represents the double reality of Yeats' self-conquest through style: O'Flaherty became both the revolutionary and the artist in efforts to command the struggle within his own soul. John Hildebidle notes: '[he] is interested not in the state of the nation—*any* nation—but the state of the soul. At the centre of all his important longer fiction stands a man driven by the resistance of the world and by the prompting of the demons within his own heart to defy all the powers of heaven and earth, even at the cost of nakedness, utter

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<sup>92</sup> Expressed in *Shame the Devil*, p. 12

<sup>93</sup> 'Then my place lay in the army of the workers, because there lay the dynamic force that was going to bring a new beauty into the consciousness of man, a new poetry, a new consciousness of the universe. I was a communist. I swore allegiance to my new god, and felt exalted, like a girl realising she was in love', O'Flaherty, *Two Years* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 72.

isolation, madness, and death [. . .] but in the end it is a desperate search for mystical insight and absolution'.<sup>94</sup>

The writer's drive to action is spurred primarily by the desire to reach such an 'absolution', an escape both from the ordinariness of his life and the static nature of peace time. The public quarrel cannot be ignored, and violence for O'Flaherty is a way of battling with a divided personality that is exploding like shells from within him — that desperation to be heard and understood. It is his method of escape from the tedium of everyday life and for this reason he returns to Ireland to resolve his psychological conflict and find purpose and meaning to his existence. In 1922, during the Irish Civil War, he occupies the Rotunda as 'Chairman of the Council of the Unemployed'. After this incident he overhears an elderly lady celebrating his alleged death.<sup>95</sup> It proves to be a moment of epiphany for the writer who suddenly realises the futility of his outward battle with others and the sudden urge to express the inner life of the artist which is hidden beneath the mask of war. Writing now becomes his vocation and it is no coincidence that within two years he publishes his first two novels and several short stories. Art is the mode through which he can extinguish the overpowering rage within his mind and find a resolution to his quarrel with community. We discover this in the emotive and poignant effect of

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<sup>94</sup> John Hildebidle, 'Liam O'Flaherty: A Curious Melancholy Wonder', *Five Irish Writers: The Errand of Keeping Alive* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 13.

<sup>95</sup> 'Standing in a crowd, O'Flaherty overhead an old woman say that the bloody murderer Liam O'Flaherty had been killed', quoted in James H. O. Brien, *Liam O'Flaherty* (New Jersey: Bucknell University Press, 1973), p. 22.



short stories such as 'Civil War' (1925), written retrospectively and aimed at purging the fire within the soul of the artist:

In the distance there was heavy machine-gun fire, and the sky was red in one quarter, not with the blaze of the rising summer sun, but with the dark red flare of flames mixed with black smoke, crackling upwards, winding and jumping in ghastly shapes, while timbers fell with monstrous jumbling sounds into the broad street, away to the right; where the Republican headquarters was surrounded and on the point of capture.<sup>96</sup>

When we read this passage it is easy to see how AE was moved into recognition of a new movement in Irish literature 'in revolt against the idea of their elders . . . winning for Ireland the repute of a realism more intimate, intense and daring than any realism in contemporary literature'.<sup>97</sup> 'Civil War' captures that emotional intensity where 'Passionate events have changed' the state of mind of both the Irish writer and his readership.<sup>98</sup> The story ends abruptly with violence evident both in language and action: "Let's give it to the bastard" announces the 'cruel, cold' soldiers as they kill the protagonist outright, firing their weapons 'point-blank into his head'.<sup>99</sup> The shock of such outbursts illustrates the contrast from the earlier romantic style in Irish literature, now transformed into a catalogue of fiction based on real and imagined events, marked by a similar potency of language. The shorter works of fiction, in particular, retrospectively reveal the foreboding atmosphere of troubled periods such as the War of Independence, captured

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<sup>96</sup> O'Flaherty, 'Civil War', *Liam O'Flaherty's Short Stories: Volume 1*, p. 121.

<sup>97</sup> AE, 'Notes and Comments', *The Irish Statesman*, 6:4 (April. 3, 1926), p. 89.

<sup>98</sup> Austin Clarke and F. R. Higgins, 'Art and Energy', *The Irish Statesman*, 3:8 (Nov. 1, 1924), p.237

<sup>99</sup> O'Flaherty, 'Civil War', p. 126.

effectively by writers like O'Faoláin in the stories 'Lilliput' (1926) and 'Midsummer Night Madness' (1932), or best demonstrated in O'Connor's classic masterpiece, 'Guests of the Nation' (1930).

O'Flaherty was influenced greatly by the effects of conflict in Ireland, and in 'Civil War' he confronts this violence head-on, dramatizing its intensity and reflecting both its beauty in art and its horror through bloodshed. The writer tends to use the turbulence of war as a way of defining his art, rather than of merely justifying a particular ideology or mode of behaviour. Although he admires the Irish revolutionary spirit, he admits in his article on O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) that he is 'not a Nationalist in the political sense', and chiefly respects the 'courage' and 'glory' which defines the men of action.<sup>100</sup> In the same article, he puts forward a case for 'the political union of the human race, in the ideal of human brotherhood', a form of egalitarian selfhood, perhaps comparable to the early ideals of the French Revolutionaries or the United Irishmen.<sup>101</sup> This feeling of identifying with his fellow men is inspired by experiences of comradeship in the trenches during the First World War which he records in 'an autobiographical note'.<sup>102</sup> It is also influenced by his wanderings around the world as a sailor and through contact with his brother Tom O'Flaherty, a committed Communist. Such encounters

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<sup>100</sup> O'Flaherty, 'O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*: An Anti-Irish Play', cited in James M. Cahalan's, *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction*, p. 109.

<sup>101</sup> O'Flaherty later describes The French Revolution as 'the most romantic event in the whole history of man', *Two Years* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 72.

<sup>102</sup> In 'an autobiographical note' O'Flaherty attributes 'the awakening of [his] conscious mind' to his experiences in the trenches. He describes encountering 'all manner of working men' and becoming 'bored with Irish Republicanism', 'A bibliography of the first editions of Liam O'Flaherty', The National Library of Ireland, Dublin, typescript MS 26,743, p. 3.

convince him that 'there always will be strife and struggle' and 'always brave men will love the weak and struggle with them'.<sup>103</sup>

In the expression of a forever tense Irish situation, O'Flaherty comes to understand the nature of life at home, entering into the mind of his people and the thought processes of the revolutionary. He recognises the shattering effects of violence on the state of mind of the individual and his community. James O'Brien contends that his 'half dozen novels' examine 'the psyche of post-Revolutionary Ireland', where the writer 'studies himself and the people of the Irish Free State, [and] singles out twisted or paralyzed characters, men lost in a fanaticism or obsession they could not recognise'.<sup>104</sup> This is most skilfully deployed in one of his best known novels, *The Informer*.

The protagonist of this novel is Gypo Nolan, a 'young man of thirty or so', physically 'immense, with massive limbs and bulging muscles' and an awkward gait, who struggles internally with the knowledge that he has informed on his friend, Frankie McPhillip, a Republican wanted by the police for the murder of the Farmers' Union Secretary.<sup>105</sup> Gypo betrays his friend Frankie for a sum of twenty pounds, leading to the man's subsequent death in a shootout. The events centre mainly around our protagonist's experiences on the run, eking out an impoverished existence in the Dublin slums (the Nighttown locale in Joyce's novels), where he

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<sup>103</sup> O'Flaherty, 'O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*: An Anti-Irish Play', *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction*, p. 110.

<sup>104</sup> James H. O'Brien, *Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 72.

<sup>105</sup> O'Flaherty, *The Informer* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1999), p. 236

cavorts with prostitutes such as Connemara Maggie and the drug addict Katie Fox, and struggles to avoid both the authorities and the leader of the Revolutionary Organisation, a cold and sinister figure named Gallagher. This character appears to represent more than a single personality, viewing himself as motivated by a 'Universal Law' which threatens the personal expression of the individual, a force which is 'not master' of itself, and is forever striving for power and dominance over others. Gallagher is a merciless revolutionary who appears like 'an atom of the human species, groping in advance [and] at war with the remainder of the species'.<sup>106</sup> The strength of the novel lies in the convincing depiction of such characters and in the descriptions of the slum dwellings, the dark streets and in particular the intimate portrayal of the slum dwellers, reflected primarily in 'the broken old men' and the 'shrivelled' women with 'yellow teeth' who appear as victims of their community, but who are at the same time apparently helpless and incapable of change.

O'Flaherty's experiences of the Civil War and his personal visits to the slums had an important bearing on the events in this novel. In one letter of 1924, shortly before he wrote *The Informer*, he describes wandering around 'the slums of Coombe' where he encounters 'the most debased types of manhood [. . .] ever seen', some of whom he remembered from 'the Rotunda incident'.<sup>107</sup> In a further letter, he identifies 'the creation of a monstrous character named Gypo Nolan [. . .] a wonderful

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<sup>106</sup> O'Flaherty, *The Informer*, p. 106.

<sup>107</sup> O'Flaherty to Garnett, 14 March, 1924, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 77.

character and quite original' and a month later reflects how 'Gypo always parades before my mind with ponderous movement, scowling, shaking his tremendous head, yelling now and again. I really will weep when I kill this beautiful monstrosity'.<sup>108</sup>

It is clear that the writer shares some relationship to his protagonist in terms of the man's physical state and stature, his Communist connections and the generally distracted state of mind of the character throughout. Gypo and the 'poor tormented' souls prevalent in the narrative can be seen not merely as products of a slum mentality but as shocking reminders of O'Flaherty's desire to unleash his own tortured inner conscience, the consequences of a troubled and nervous disposition and his general 'war' against the institutions in society which have created universal poverty and degradation.<sup>109</sup> It is a 'feeling of intense hatred against the oppressive hand of the law, which sometimes stretches out to strike someone [. . .] a clarion call to all the spiritual emotion that finds no other means of expression in that sordid environment, neither in art, nor in industry, nor in commercial undertakings, nor in the more reasonable searchings for a religious understanding of the universal creation'.<sup>110</sup>

It seems likely that despite his 'monstrosity' of protagonist, we are given moments of entry into an artistic soul, where we find a longing for sympathy with the individual as a victim of environment and circumstance, of his own naivety and

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<sup>108</sup> O'Flaherty to Garnett, 7-28 July, 1924, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, pp. 95-98.

<sup>109</sup> O'Flaherty, *The Informer*, p. 37.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

instability of mind. This is best captured in Chapter Eleven when we learn that Gypo's 'crime' has been discovered by Gallagher and the Revolutionary Organisation. We are told that his face 'went ashen' and his body 'shivered and started into awe-inspiring movement, monstrous and inhuman [. . .] pitiful in its helplessness'.<sup>111</sup> Then we seem to enter into the tortured soul of the character, which somehow reflects that Nietzschean struggle with the forces of community which ultimately drives the writer's personality, that desire to express self-preservation and survival, in the midst of despair:

All the countless centuries of human development that had left their impression on that body, to make it into the glorious image of a God-like human being, withered away during that time of agony, leaving only a chaotic convulsion of limbs writhing and strange visions racing over his convulsing features.

The sight was fearsome even to the callous men that surrounded him [. . .] They forgot for the moment their hatred of him [. . .] They only knew at the moment, that he was a poor, weak human being like themselves, a human soul, weak and helpless in suffering, shivering in the toils of the eternal struggle of the human soul with pain.<sup>112</sup>

As in *Mr Gilhooley* (1926), we have a sense here of the turmoil working within the mind of our protagonist, apparently trapped in 'the hidden squalor' of the city and 'wild with the excitement of his escape' back to nature, where he can only dream of 'the mountains and the wide undulating plains [. . .] away to the south in his own country' and of 'Freedom and solitude and quiet, with only the wind coming

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

through the bog heather'.<sup>113</sup> The generally 'sordid' reality of Dublin life for all the characters fleshes out the miseries within O'Flaherty's own soul, that ultimate battle with the self. He defines this in another incident when Gypo 'wrinkled up his face and looked at his youth intently. He stiffened himself, as if he were about to hurl himself by sheer force back through the intervening years, of sin and sorrow and misery, to the peace and gentleness and monotony of life, in that little village at the foot of the Galtees'.<sup>114</sup> This is a telling reminder of the artist himself, haunted by the memory of revolution and the tranquillity of rural life on the Aran Islands in the face of modernity.

### **O'Flaherty's "Black Soul" and the Realist tradition (Maupassant and Dostoyevsky)**

It is possible to see O'Flaherty as a man shaped by the circumstances of his time: whether it be political events in Ireland or the changing world of Aran and the inevitable clash between two cultures. There is also scope for arguing that works such as *The Informer* reflect the writer's disillusionment with the city and his desire to return to nature in his native Aran. This is a rather simplified approach when we consider both the parental influences and the personal experiences of the artist. Various sources prove that O'Flaherty was a gifted child with an extraordinary imagination and flair for creativity, and it is clear that he became aware of the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

conflict between his own nature and that of his community at a very young age.<sup>115</sup> He describes in one of his autobiographies an incident when he was a young boy living on the Aran Islands and he wrote a short story about a native islander who happens to kill his wife. The fictional account was not well received at home or in his local school. He then records how he was subsequently thrashed by his schoolmaster David O'Callaghan and reprimanded by his mother, who immediately insisted that he pray to God for forgiveness. The event had a lasting impact on the artist's state of mind, as he outlines:

And from that day I hid my dreams. I became a dual personality. The one wept with my mother and felt ashamed of his secret mind [. . .] and began to dream of greatness. And as my mind grew strong and defiant, I became timid and sensitive in my relationship with the people about me. I became prone to dreaming, quick at my schooling, ashamed of vulgar profanity and rowdy conduct.<sup>116</sup>

What this episode proves is that the writer is confronted with a state of censorship at a very young age, an infringement or curtailment of desire to express the inner self which becomes 'ashamed of [a] secret mind'. The artist within O'Flaherty realises outright that he is different from others and he is destined to be in conflict with his surroundings because he cannot openly express his feelings out of fear of punishment or criticism from the adults who surround him. We have already

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<sup>115</sup> P. A. Doyle describes O'Flaherty's 'reputation for scholastic brilliance', 'An Irish Version of the Byronic Hero', *Liam O' Flaherty*, p.18, and Patrick Sheeran refers to 'Liam's zeal for scholarship' and the fact that both he and his brother were 'exceptionally bright at school', *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 58.

<sup>116</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil*, p. 19.



outlined how he is cast inwards to express himself, much like Mangan, Yeats and Joyce, 'prone to dreaming', 'timid and sensitive in [his] relationship' with others. The young boy's anger at being restricted from self-expression is thereby repressed and 'hidden' and he is forced to dismiss his artistic nature temporarily. When he becomes an adult, however, O'Flaherty is no longer under the strict supervision of others and he longs to free himself from the chains of his community and the poverty of his upbringing. He is recognised as a young, gifted scholar and is recruited to train for the priesthood at Rockwell and later at Blackrock College and so he seizes his opportunity for counter-attack. In one account he describes his rebellious nature at the Dublin Diocesan seminary at Clonliffe:

I detested the other students and the priests in charge, who were soon outraged by the violence of my opinions. After a few weeks, I danced on my soutane, kicked my silk hat to pieces, spat on my religious books, made a fig at the whole rigmarole of Christianity and left that crazy den of superstitious ignorance.<sup>117</sup>

The escape from this 'den of superstition' was through active combat, the antithesis of the writer's artistic self. Here O'Flaherty could find an opposite to his own creative nature by enlisting as a soldier in the First World War and resisting the longing for imaginative fulfilment through action. If this 'early training [becomes] emblematic of the training the artist must undergo', the experience also proves to be traumatic for the young writer, after he encounters a gas attack at Langemarck in

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<sup>117</sup> O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil*, p. 21.

1917.<sup>118</sup> O'Flaherty's brush with death leads to a life-long psychological condition known as *melancholia acuta*, and the effects of shell-shock are permanent and psychologically damaging, as he admits in his own words: 'You have to go through life with that shell bursting in your head'.<sup>119</sup> O'Flaherty suffers periodic fits of depression, instability and inner turmoil for the rest of his life and his art becomes a way of stabilising this mental condition. The tendency in the fiction is to battle the inner demons that haunt the man and artist: a conflict which is overtly physical as well as mental. His writing reveals a deeply divided personality, struggling to overcome the debilitating effects of shell-shock.

These issues are brought to the surface in novels such as *Return of the Brute* (1929) which explores the horrors of war through the eyes of a company of soldiers, battling mental instability and survival in No Man's Land. The conflict is presented as 'a struggle between [. . .] brutes' which ends in disaster when the main character Gunn decides to kill 'The Corporal' of his battalion.<sup>120</sup> O'Flaherty's intention in this novel is certainly not to glorify war, although there is a recognition of 'men who give glory to the foul horror' of it.<sup>121</sup> There is a strong feeling of psychological conflict at work, a way of coming to terms with the struggle against environment. This sentiment is also recorded in *Two Years* (1930) when the author visits London shortly after his experiences in the trenches. On this occasion O'Flaherty recalls the victory

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<sup>118</sup> Patrick Sheeran, *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 67.

<sup>119</sup> O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil*, p. 83.

<sup>120</sup> O'Flaherty, *Return of the Brute* (London: The Mandrake Press, 1929), p. 158.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

parade he witnessed and the obscenity of the war itself, illustrating 'merely the riot of a mob in celebration of the victory of a mob over another mob, equally senseless. That barren and inglorious war, whose record is mud and noise and obscene poison, ended in a common debauch of drunkenness, gluttony and fornication'.<sup>122</sup>

The most successful early work which explores the personal trauma of shell-shock and the experiences of trench warfare is *The Black Soul*. This novel charts one man's psychological condition and efforts to return to 'civilisation' after the First World War. Vivian Mercier has suggested that in such novels O'Flaherty's 'great creative outpouring was a form of mental therapy . . . [and] having grown more stable as he grew older, he may have lost the fear of madness only to find that he had exorcized his creative demon at the same time'.<sup>123</sup> In this respect his writing can be seen as a form of catharsis or a way of resolving the quarrel with himself and others, a feeling which can be found deep within his soul or psyche:

It was only yesterday as I was coming back from London [. . .] I jumped on my bicycle without eating and cycled home yelling like a madman. And since then I feel the pain down in my heart that you say a woman makes you feel. I have begun to write *The Black Soul* again. It is giving me the same sad joy that it gave me in Warren Street [. . .] I am eternally grateful to you for keeping me true to my own soul. It's black, curse it, and I don't want it to get yellow, or white or the colour of a bank account.<sup>124</sup>

In this quotation we find the connection between the state of mind of O'Flaherty the artist and his work of fiction, a recognition that the expression of the self comes from

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<sup>122</sup> O'Flaherty, *Two Years* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 74.

<sup>123</sup> Selected from James M. Cahalan's chapter on 'The Critics', *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction*, p.153.

<sup>124</sup> O'Flaherty to Garnett, August 1923, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 36.

a feeling of 'the pain down in [his] heart' and of remaining 'true' to his 'own soul'. It is essentially that mixture of sadness and joy ('sad joy') which the author believed to be at the centre of great writing.<sup>125</sup>

*The Black Soul* is O'Flaherty's finest achievement as a young writer because it so successfully explores the inner suffering of the individual artist and chronicles the experiences of 'a man in a state of despair'.<sup>126</sup> The novel followed years of anguish and suffering from the point of view of the writer, beginning with his early life in impoverished circumstances and ending with his direct experiences of war. The protagonist Fergus O'Connor shares the experiences of the author himself: a man whose soul is tortured by memories of violence and bloodshed and who appears to be suffering from a form of post-traumatic stress or mental torment about previous events in his life. The writing is more emotive and psychologically penetrating, more intense and passionate than *Thy Neighbour's Wife* (1923), O'Flaherty's first published novel, which charts the experiences of one Fr Hugh McMahon, 'a man of strong passions', who must choose between his love for a married woman and his duty to the community as a clergyman.<sup>127</sup> What we find in *The Black Soul* is a greater search to resolve the author's spiritual despair through recollections of combat and of wandering the world, convincingly depicted in the mind of O'Connor:

Then a monstrous picture came, distorted like a madman's fancy.  
It was a vast plain without a tree or a blade of grass, pock-mocked with shell-

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<sup>125</sup> Daniel Albright identifies a similar concern in Yeats' case, where 'tragic joy is the ultimate response of both artist and sage', quoted in ed. W. B. Yeats: *The Poems* (London: Everyman, 1990), pp. 773-775.

<sup>126</sup> O'Flaherty to Garnett, 30 July, 1923, *The Letters*, p. 36.

<sup>127</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *Thy Neighbour's Wife* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1992), p. 16.

holes, covered with rotting corpses. He could see the vermin crawling on the dead lips. And he smiled. That picture did not accuse himself. It accused the world he hated. 'Just think of it,' he muttered, 'I spent three years in that hell, Great God!

He smiled as he saw himself wandering around the world for two years after the war, trying to find somewhere to rest – Canada, the Argentine, South Africa. 'What a blasted fool I was! As if there were any rest for a man in this world!' <sup>128</sup>

This is a recognisable account of the author's personal experiences, 'a picture' that accuses 'the world' rather than the self of wrongdoing, through resentment or 'hatred' of how O'Flaherty was treated as a young man. The statement 'As if there were any rest for a man in this world' is in many ways an accurate illustration of the writer's own feelings and personality, a restless individual who could find neither peace nor resolution, except through his writing. In this case the protagonist becomes the author's mouthpiece: a reflection of the artist himself and of his art. In fact virtually all the characters in *The Black Soul* present an outright quarrel between individuals and their community. The opening of the novel reflects the violence of nature in the image of the sea roaring 'around the shores of Inverara' and this sense of the passionate power of the sea and its environment mirrors the restlessness of the people themselves, battling not only the elements but each other.<sup>129</sup>

The first two characters we encounter are Red John and Little Mary, a husband and wife who are each central to the narrative and are shown to despise one another, evident in the violence of the language and in images such as:

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<sup>128</sup> O'Flaherty, *The Black Soul* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

‘Sometimes they sat a whole winter’s evening in silence, peering into the blaze. They hated one another. Red John, crabbit, weak-featured and bandy-legged [. . .] His red sun-burned cheeks, seen through his red beard, were puffing in and out like a bellows [...] he struck the turf fire with his shoe [and] She hit the dog and sent him away from her to the dresser’.<sup>130</sup> Red John is taunted and mocked by the islanders because he is childless and married to Little Mary, ‘the illegitimate daughter of a Breton smuggler’, and when he is reminded about this during bouts of intoxication, he offers ‘to fight the whole of Inverara’, which only serves to diminish his status in the eyes of the people.<sup>131</sup>

The frustrations and sexual tensions between the couple are brought to a climax with the entrance of ‘the Stranger’ (Fergus O’Connor) who has come to the island ‘as a cure for his nerves’, and appears as the perfect foil to Red John: tall and overbearing, whose ‘wildness was of the sea and of all things that were passionate and strong and beautiful’.<sup>132</sup> The character’s physical appearance betrays the conflict within his soul when he is viewed from the perspective of Little Mary, who is drawn to him from the outset:

As his face turned to her in the half-light, she could see that he was intoxicated, but she was not afraid of that. It seemed to her to be natural that her man should drink [. . .] But the Stranger kept silent. He had drunk several glasses of whisky in Derrane’s shebeen, and the whisky had made him gloomy and depressed, as it always does with men whose souls are troubled. He kept looking into the fire,

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-19.

furrowing his forehead, twitching his nostrils and cracking the fingers of his right hand restlessly.<sup>133</sup>

It is once again the power and dramatic language that brings to our attention the struggle within the mind of the author, just as we learn from the personal letters of O'Flaherty's restless and impulsive nature. We have recollections of the recurring effects of shell-shock on his state of mind, records of 'a bad nervous stroke on Sunday which kept me prostrate until this afternoon', which remind us of the Stranger in moments of physical rage and erratic behaviour.<sup>134</sup> We are told in one instance that 'He clenched his hands and gritted his teeth to kill those hateful thoughts that began to rush into his mind like a shower of bullets fired in rapid succession'.<sup>135</sup> There is a sense that this character, like the author, can never be at peace from the memory of war and violence, he is always at odds with his surroundings and the ultimate desire is to break free from this endless conflict. The finest example in the novel is during O'Connor's encounter with John Carmody when we are told that he 'felt a sense of freedom creeping over him. The outspoken wanderer, Carmody was, he felt, an outcast from society like himself, at war with the world. He was a kindred spirit. 'Ha, ha,' he thought, it would be a great life to lounge around in Inverara [. . .] It would be revenge on the world . . . to cheat the blackness in his soul'.<sup>136</sup> Here we find evidence of the deeply spiritual dilemma

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> O'Flaherty's letter to Garnett, 6 February 1924, *The Letters*, p. 70.

<sup>135</sup> O'Flaherty, *The Black Soul*, p. 20.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p.38.

which the novel seems to expose for the individual and his community, and there is no question that the emphasis is on an underlying tension or fear on the part of the author to consider his own fate and circumstances.

In the Stranger's belief that he is 'at war with the world', we have an almost literal rewording of Joyce's views on the artist Mangan or an art form that appears 'at war with its age', the ultimate quarrel between self and community. It follows that at the end of the novel the Stranger recognises some form of 'kinship between his own soul and that of Red John, that he himself was mad like Red John' and he experiences a flashback of 'the night in France when the shells falling about his ears filled his head with red demons, gathered together with lightning rush and formed in a word that he read, horrified, 'Insanity.'<sup>137</sup> This fear of madness is related not only to the reality of shell-shock but to the feeling of endless conflict with society, the recognition of marginalisation as an 'outcast' which O'Connor shares with O'Flaherty and many other characters in the fiction. The author's personal obsession and fear that he might never achieve self-mastery through art also weighs heavily on his conscience throughout his writing. Such anxieties about the past and the future follow him for the rest of his life, most potent of all in correspondence relating to *The Black Soul*.<sup>138</sup>

The letters to Garnett reveal how significant and heartfelt was O'Flaherty's

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>138</sup> On 16 October 1923 O'Flaherty wrote to Garnett justifying his evocation of Red John's madness, describing his own experiences of depression and insisting: 'I know, probably, more about madmen than you do', *The Letters*, p. 51. More than a year later (29 Jan 1925) he describes being at 'a stage of recovery when my brain seems on the verge of disintegration and any mental effort threatens me with immediate and dire insanity', *The Letters*, p. 113.



personal struggle to create this novel, which he constantly revised and rewrote, perhaps most of all because it was the work of art which was closest to his own heart and soul. It was through literature that he could find the outlet for his suffering and so he could not subscribe solely to the belief that great art was born out of complete anguish; it was simply a mechanism to purge the pain within his soul, to have that freedom to express what he believed, which is why, when he succeeded in achieving a measure of artistic success, he would come to argue that 'the ill-health plea for writing is false. I feel as fit as a fiddle'.<sup>139</sup> On 30<sup>th</sup> June 1923 he writes to Garnett:

I am coming near the end of *The Black Soul*. I didn't want to do 'August' until I got your advice on it, but I got the itch and I had to go ahead with it [. . .] I am feeling elated at the prospect of finishing [. . .] The prospect of starting another novel leaves me cold. It would also leave me very poor I think. But I suppose I have a lot of work to do on *The Black Soul* yet. Wherever in the hell did we get the crazy fellow from? Nobody will believe us when we tell them that he is real.<sup>140</sup>

The pains that the writer takes to complete this novel are here evident. The question he poses, 'Wherever in the hell did we get the crazy fellow from?' is also interesting because it suggests that O'Flaherty is willing to consider the influences on his art as a development beyond the personal struggle with his own nature, (the appearance in this letter of an *alter ego* called 'General Rathcroghan'), to incorporate a wider conflict with his surroundings, one that is 'real' rather than imaginary.<sup>141</sup> Eleven days earlier he appears to have been more confident in his reasons for writing, stating

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<sup>139</sup> O'Flaherty to Garnett, August 1923, *The Letters*, p. 36.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>141</sup> O'Flaherty makes a distinction in this letter between the protagonist of *The Black Soul* ('The Stranger') and his recognisable *alter ego*, General Rathcroghan, who is mentioned in various letters to Garnett, see both ?April and ? May 1923, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, pp. 12-22.

emphatically: 'Truly I have a black soul', proof of the fact that the novel can be seen as an exploration of the self or the inner life of the artist at a deeply personal and psychological level.<sup>142</sup>

What is most significant in this correspondence is that the author openly admits collaboration between mentor and writer in the effort to complete the novel. The relationship with Garnett was essential to O'Flaherty's development as an artist, a gentleman to whom he attributed everything he knew 'about the craft [of writing] and a great deal of all [he knew] about the art of writing'.<sup>143</sup> As one critic has suggested, just as 'Yeats had done for Synge several years previously, O'Flaherty's English mentor Edward Garnett had advised him to look to Ireland for literary inspiration', encouraging the passionate interest in a form of literature which came from the heart, based on a familiarity with a traditional culture and setting.<sup>144</sup> Perhaps most significantly, the correspondence between the author and his mentor recognises several other influences, beyond the distinctly Irish connection. These letters reveal that the author is steeped in the reading of both nineteenth-century Russian realism and the French realist tradition. Writers such as Gogol, Turgenev, Chekov, Dostoyevsky and Maupassant all feature prominently here.<sup>145</sup> There are alternative influences mentioned in the letters, notably the reading of Conrad and Lawrence, but O'Flaherty is most explicit in his celebration of the Russian masters,

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>143</sup> O'Flaherty, 'Apprenticeship as a Writer', *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction*, p. 95.

<sup>144</sup> Frank Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical 1923-1958* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 43.

<sup>145</sup> O'Flaherty to Garnett, 19 June, 1923, *The Letters*, p. 44.

describing 'Tchekov as the greatest genius ever born' and on occasion admitting his disdain for Lawrence because he does not like his 'way of writing'.<sup>146</sup>

The impact of a rich European literary tradition on the Irish writer was not unique to the fiction of O'Flaherty. Both George Moore and James Joyce made explicit reference to their continental influences—in the case of Joyce it was Ibsen and Flaubert who were central to the development of his artistic consciousness, and it is likely that the tragic death of Mrs Sinico in 'A Painful Case' owed something to his reading of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.<sup>147</sup> O'Flaherty was also fortunate to read the classic writers and, having worked with Garnett, whose wife Constance was the leading translator of Russian literature of the age, the young aspiring artist was made familiar with the works of many of the great masters of nineteenth and twentieth-century literature.

The special relationship between Russian and Irish literature was earlier illustrated by Daniel Corkery in May 1916 in an article published in *The Leader*, in which he argued that 'Russian literature [. . .] uses for its own end a scheme of life which has much in common with Irish life; and at the same time it is a modern literature. It practically did not exist before the nineteenth century. These early Russian litterateurs – Pushkin, Lemontov, Gogol - when they looked from their own

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<sup>146</sup> In two different letters O'Flaherty makes this claim, stating to Garnett in April 1923 that he doesn't 'give a damn about your Lawrence, Chekov is the goods' and then on 14th May 1923 'I don't like that Lawrence's way of writing'. He later changes his mind about him, stating on 19th June 1923, that 'Lawrence is a master. I read a copy of *Adelphi*, with a short thing by him in it about trees. Yes, he is the goods. He lives, by Christ he does', *The Letters*, pp. 9-24.

<sup>147</sup> C  il  n Owens, *James Joyce's Painful Case* (Florida: The University of Florida Press, 2008), p. 183.

eyes out on Russia found in the first place the cultures of other peoples and languages seated in high places [. . .] And the one great central fact in that peasant nation was its religion'.<sup>148</sup> Corkery's mission was to restore a belief in an Irish national tradition which recognised a rich literary heritage and culture in Gaelic, effectively challenging colonial interpretations of Ireland's past.<sup>149</sup> He believed that Russian literature was 'the most national and the most significant of all modern literatures' because it was concerned with real life, with the native language and dialect of a culture. Since both Ireland and Russia were agrarian countries and had witnessed sporadic periods of censorship leading to drastic social and economic changes in the nineteenth century, he believed they had something in common.<sup>150</sup>

If O'Flaherty learned anything from such parallels it was more to do with how history and communities related to the nature of the artistic mind. The foremost connection between O'Flaherty's fiction and European writers was the unveiling of a realist form of fiction, an insight into the psychology of character, denoted in a richly evocative style which was primarily concerned with intimacy of detail, using figurative language for effect. O'Flaherty's fiction is indeed more personal than political in nature, as Zneimer maintains, although it is also steeped in the physical realities of environment, in the Irish setting, the experiences of travel and conflict, the ideological and intellectual influences on the author, and mainly the desire to

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<sup>148</sup> Daniel Corkery, 'Russian Models for Irish Literateurs', first published in *The Leader* 27<sup>th</sup> May 1916, selected from ed. Heather Laird, *Daniel Corkery's Cultural Criticism*, p. 19.

<sup>149</sup> Daniel Corkery, 'Introduction', *The Hidden Ireland*, vii.

<sup>150</sup> Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland*, xvii.

come to terms with a deeply psychological and spiritual crisis within his soul. The claim that 'the fiction is related to modern consciousness and not to some specific Irish quality' must be challenged because it is not possible to separate the artist from either influence.<sup>151</sup> He is the product of both environment and individuality - the unique and personal qualities of the artist.

In the reading of French and Russian writers, O'Flaherty recognised the same inherent or instinctual sufferings that the artist must endure in order to resolve the conflict between his inner beliefs and the external world outside of his mind. Coming from a strictly peasant background on the Aran Islands, he was certainly attracted to the particular way in which Russian writers treated peasant existence and there is evidence to suggest these influences in his writing, at least in his short stories.<sup>152</sup> In *I Went to Russia* (1931) he makes explicit reference to his reading of Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842), and in his letters he admits he does not like Turgenev's stories but recognises the 'wonderful art' in 'Clara Millitch' (1883) and the 'masterpiece among masterpieces' which is *Fathers and Sons* (1862).<sup>153</sup> It is probable that he borrowed the title for at least one of his short stories, 'Poor People' (1925), from Dostoevsky, an author whose 'supreme genius' captured 'all the slovenliness,

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<sup>151</sup> 'What is significant about the man [O'Flaherty] and his work is related to modern consciousness and not to some specific Irish quality', Zneimer, 'Introduction', *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty*, ix.

<sup>152</sup> In O'Flaherty's letter to Garnett on 28 Nov 1923 he mentions Tchekov's story 'Peasants' and speaks of 'the marvellous power that Tchekov had in giving us reams of the peasants' history and outlook in life and habits', *The Letters*, p. 59.

<sup>153</sup> 'I remembered the two peasants in the opening paragraph of Gogol's *Dead Souls*,' O'Flaherty, *I Went to Russia*, p.114; letter to Garnett, August 1923 and 2 Nov, 1923, *The Letters*, p. 38 and p. 54.

the insanity, the poverty, the melancholy, the wild passions that goaded people'.<sup>154</sup>

He was certainly capable of exposing with stark realism and brutality the life of the destitute, depicted in *Crime and Punishment* (1865-66) as a 'sin' against nature.<sup>155</sup>

O'Flaherty's 'Poor People' is an equally poignant and revealing insight into poverty and human compassion where language and imagery capture the overwhelming grief and darkness associated with a young child's death, convincingly illustrated in the opening lines: 'The sound of the sea grumbled through the calm darkness of the dawn'.<sup>156</sup>

The most striking influence on characterisation and subject matter in the novels is drawn from the fiction of writers like Maupassant and Dostoevsky, principally because these figures shared an interest in expressing the passionate life of the individual and the violence endemic in human nature. The temperamental nature of the authors' personalities and their unconventional lifestyles had attractions for O'Flaherty perhaps because he recognised parallels with his own complex circumstances and psychology. Maupassant's image of the artist (clearly influenced by his mentor Flaubert) as a distinct person who stands alone with no

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<sup>154</sup> The title of Dostoevsky's first novel 'Poor People' or 'Poor Folk' (1846) is well-known. O'Flaherty refers on various occasions in his letters to the influence of Dostoevsky, for example on 2 May 1924 when he states 'I believe [ . . . ] as one believes in Turgenev and Dostoevsky' and later on 31 July 1925 'I read nothing now but Joyce and Dostoevsky and Gogol', *The Letters*, p. 90 and p. 127. He also enters into a lengthy explanation of Dostoevsky's 'supreme genius' and 'magnificent writings' in *I Went to Russia*, pp. 138-139, where the influence of *The Idiot* is mentioned.

<sup>155</sup> In this episode Dostoevsky uses the character Marmeladov to illustrate the difference between poverty and destitution: 'poverty is not a sin [ . . . ] But destitution, dear sir, destitution-that is a sin. When a man is born poor he may still preserve the nobility of his inborn feelings, but when he is destitute he never can. If a man's destitute he isn't even driven out with a stick, he's swept out of human society with a broom', David McDuff's translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's, *Crime and Punishment* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 17.

<sup>156</sup> O'Flaherty, 'Poor People', *Liam O'Flaherty's Short Stories: Volume 2*, p. 33.

allegiance to anyone or anything but the self, that individual state of mind he conjures in remarks such as '*pas de protection, pas de patronage, pas de subvention*' ('no protection, no patronage, no subsidy') had obvious attractions for O'Flaherty.<sup>157</sup> He describes this author as 'the great master' and mentions the influence of his writing in various letters to Kitty Tailer.<sup>158</sup> He also records early in May 1924 that he is writing a story entitled *The Vendetta*, which is the same title Maupassant used for a short story about a mother's premeditated revenge on the murderer of her son.<sup>159</sup>

Edward D. Sullivan's assessment of Maupassant as an independent writer who refused to pander to the public or the state could be equally attributed to O'Flaherty:

He suffered periods of great discouragement, feeling unable to produce anything of merit, as in August 1878 when he wrote to Flaubert that he had tried to write some *Chroniques* for the *Gaulois* in order to make a little money but was unable to compose a line and sat staring, almost weeping, at the blank sheet before him [. . .] The core of Maupassant's novelistic creed is to be found in a single principle [. . .] that the only valid novelistic technique is that which attempts to reveal the inner man by his acts, without recourse to direct analysis.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Selected from Edward D. Sullivan's *Maupassant: The Novelist* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 11, where he explains the writer's philosophy of art: 'Writers alone are free, says Maupassant, to speak to the intelligent public, and free they must remain'.

<sup>158</sup> Catharine Harding or 'Kitty Pie', as O'Flaherty describes in his letters, was an American divorcee whom the author met in America in the 1930s. She became a very close friend and moral support for him in later life. In various letters to Kitty he mentions the influence of Maupassant. See A.A. Kelly's *The Letters*, p. 313, 404 and 430. He also records that his early stories were 'barbarous compared to those of the great master, 'an autobiographical note', 'A bibliography of the first editions of Liam O'Flaherty', The National Library of Ireland, Dublin, typescript MS 26,743, p. 4.

<sup>159</sup> The story which O'Flaherty entitled *The Vendetta* later became *The Informer*. The relevant letter was addressed to Edward Garnett in May 1924, *The Letters*, p. 93.

<sup>160</sup> In reference to Maupassant's letter to Flaubert, August 21, 1878; LF, XV, 243, selected from Sullivan's *Maupassant: The Novelist*, pp. 5-26.

The idea of 'the inner man' would certainly have its appeal to O'Flaherty. The psychological torture of being unable to produce anything of merit, met with the constant fear of madness and the progressive symptoms of syphilis, had a debilitating effect on Maupassant's state of mind in the same way that O'Flaherty admits preoccupation with his own physical and mental ailments. He takes a particular interest in the French writer's condition, pondering as late as July 1967: 'He was quite a man, *le petit Guy*. Apparently they do have proof that he inherited his syphilis from his mother, or from his reputed natural father, Gustave Flaubert [. . .] Would he have been better under different circumstances?'<sup>161</sup> Such questions imply that the author is perhaps considering his own development as an artist and the thematic comparisons between the two writers. Maupassant's *The Horla* (1885), for example, is a powerful insight into the psychology of an unstable mind, pondering the 'inner being' and the relationship to 'the exterior being, which constitutes the world', a move to rationalise from the point of view of a man who is dying or losing all sense of health and well-being.<sup>162</sup> O'Flaherty's personal style in works such as *Shame the Devil* and *Two Years* appear as similar efforts to come to terms with mental instability following experiences of trauma and personal injury.

The violence and passion depicted in the works of Maupassant appealed to O'Flaherty, and it was certainly the magnet drawing him towards the inner life of troubled, passionate individuals in the works of Dostoevsky. George Russell

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<sup>161</sup> O'Flaherty's letter to Kitty Tailer, 8 July 1967, *The Letters*, p. 404.

<sup>162</sup> Charlotte Mandell's translation of Guy de Maupassant's *The Horla* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2005), p. 50.



recognised in *The Black Soul* the same kind of 'passionate intensity' and psychological turmoil present in the realist tradition, describing the novel as 'the most elemental thing in modern Irish literature' because it overwhelmed 'one like a storm' in its evocation of 'sympathy between the spirit of man and the spirit of nature'.<sup>163</sup> L.K. Emery's review in the first edition of *To-morrow* (August 1924) was equally favourable, praising *The Black Soul* because 'it opens new literary vistas for Ireland', based on its tendency to resurrect 'in language evocative of the subject' passions which were both 'primitive' and 'psychological', influenced by 'the Russians, on the one side, and the competition of the cinema, on the other'.<sup>164</sup> For Emery the novel presented 'both drama and psychology', which is particularly evident in moments when we see the Stranger debating in his mind the struggle between his own nature and the elements around him, as we discover during one occasion in 'Winter':

He fancied he could see his brain thinking. It appeared to him to be like a crystal with amorphous ideas glinting within it [. . .] Then he lay back from the contemplation of his brain and became aware of the power and vastness of nature [. . .] He smiled, confident that he had solved the puzzle of his life. Now death could hold no terror for him, since after death he would return to nature and nature was immortal [. . .] He judged the world in the light of his discovery, that life was motion without purpose [. . .] He watched the tens of millions of people in cities striving for wealth, power and fame, sacrificing everything to gain honour and property. He laughed outright, heartily. It was the most ridiculous farce he had ever looked at.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Selected from AE's review of *The Black Soul*, *The Irish Statesman*, May 3, 1924.

<sup>164</sup> L.K. Emery, 'A Primitive', *To-morrow*, Vol. 1. No. 1 August 1924, p. 7.

<sup>165</sup> O'Flaherty, *The Black Soul*, pp. 67-68.

The forces of nature and human existence are fused together in this episode so that the protagonist is shown as a real presence in the world, questioning his existence in the face of the elements surrounding him. There is consideration of the Darwinian or Nietzschean view of civilisation, the battle for dominance and survival in a world where 'millions of people strive for wealth, power and privilege' and yet the greater need is to preserve a unique sense of self and individual purpose in the work of art, an almost existential insight into the state of mind of the individual character. There is always a sense of a man watching from a distance, contemplating 'the puzzle of his life' or observing the earth as it throbs with 'motion', the landscape and natural forces arousing 'passion' and 'awakening energy'.<sup>166</sup> The apparent nihilism gives way to a thinking human being with the capacity to rationalise and analyse the purpose of human existence, whether for good or evil, albeit from the perspective of a distracted or semi-delusional state of mind. In this respect we have traces of a Dostoevskian landscape, notably the world of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*.

The violence of Raskolnikov's character is manifested firstly from within, in the same way that both the Stranger in *The Black Soul* and Gypo Nolan in *The Informer* are struggling from the outset with their emotions, desperate to make sense of their fate and circumstances. Fergus O'Connor is presented as more intelligent than Gypo, battling with 'the blackness in his soul' in the same way that Raskolnikov is spiritually conscious of 'that terrible burden which had been weighing him down for so long' so that his 'soul' reaches out 'to experience a sense of lightness and

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<sup>166</sup> O'Flaherty, *The Black Soul*, pp. 86-91.

peace'.<sup>167</sup> The key parallels are in the characters' desperation to overcome the inner despair which haunts them psychologically and the need to understand their purpose in an apparently indifferent world. This spiritual crisis is acutely present in Raskolnikov's 'tense, irritable state of mind' at the beginning of *Crime and Punishment*, and even before he murders Alyona Ivanovna and her sister Lizaveta. Here we are told of the 'entire agonizing inner struggle he went through'.<sup>168</sup> He is 'Almost unconsciously prompted by a kind of inner necessity [. . .] a kind of effort to scrutinise every object he encountered as though in desperate quest of some diversion, [which] failed to work, [. . .] sinking back into his state of brooding'.<sup>169</sup> The 'vicious contempt' for the world 'in the young man's soul' is then manifested physically. He is an impoverished student, wandering around St Petersburg who has 'in no uncertain terms, withdrawn from everyone like a tortoise into its shell,' similar to how Gypo stalks the streets of Dublin, eking out an apparently hopeless existence, 'irritated' and 'confused' as 'an informer and an outcast' with his soul in peril.<sup>170</sup>

What attracts O'Flaherty to such characters is the state of his own artistic soul, manifested in the Stranger's and Gypo's hostility towards their community, men who are equally marginalised and haunted by the violence of their past. In creating such personalities the author identifies with a kind of underground existence, possibly inspired by the protagonist of Dostoyevsky's original masterpiece *Notes*

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<sup>167</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 74.

<sup>168</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 85

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7; O'Flaherty, *The Informer*, pp. 32-39.

*from the Underground* (1864) — a narrative which charts the plight of an individual withdrawn and cut off from his community. As Bernard J. Paris asserts, in the case of Raskolnikov we have ‘a man in whom the spiritual and earthly selves dominate by turns. He is both a believer and an atheist [. . .] full of psychological conflicts that lead to internal vacillations and inconsistent behaviour. The underground man tries to cope with inner divisions by distancing himself from other people and from his own feelings [. . .] We see him torn by opposing forces throughout the novel until his conflicts are resolved by his conversion in the end’.<sup>171</sup>

We find similar qualities in O’Flaherty’s writings, that desire for resolution or peace even in hostile characters such as the schoolmaster Skerrett (modelled on O’Flaherty’s teacher O’Callaghan) who sees himself as ‘an enemy of the people’, regarding ‘the life about him with aversion’ whilst reaching out to embrace ‘happiness’.<sup>172</sup> Skerrett rages against his community and Church, dominated by the presence of the parish priest Moclair, and after a fierce and heated struggle in this environment over many years, he finally succumbs to madness. O’Flaherty recognises such temperaments and empathises with them, evident in autobiographical works such as *I went to Russia*, an account of his experiences of visiting the country in the 1930s. He opens with outright denunciation of the corrupt nature of Western capitalism. The book is written from the perspective of a man

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<sup>171</sup> Bernard J. Paris, *Dostoevsky’s Greatest Characters: A New Approach to “Notes from the Underground,” Crime and Punishment, and the Brothers Karamozov* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 71-82.

<sup>172</sup> O’Flaherty, *Skerrett* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1993), p. 19.

consumed by personal anxieties and anger at the refusal of his society to listen to what the individual or creative artist has to say, apparent when he begins:

Nowadays, owing to the growth of democracy and the machine, the profession of literature has ceased to be an art. It is an industry. Literary men, if they must eat by their work, are forced to watch and pander to the tastes of the public, just like any other class of manufacturers [ . . . ] So I set out for Moscow with black anger in my heart against the whole of human society, which has become so corrupt and democratic and indifferent to art.<sup>173</sup>

What is most striking here is that O'Flaherty is writing from personal experience, and the claim he makes is that he writes 'honestly, for the sole purpose of making some money'.<sup>174</sup> He expresses contempt for 'all political beliefs', branding 'as a perverted scoundrel any man with an itch for changing the world and the habits of mankind'.<sup>175</sup> If there are no hints of an exaggerated bravado at the heart of this writing, there is certainly a tone of bitterness and resentment towards his culture, reminiscent of his attitude towards the church authorities in Ireland at this time. Of course O'Flaherty is not Raskolnikov and neither is he O'Connor or Nolan, but he feels confident enough to lay claim to understanding their state of mind due to his own periodic instability. His novels present a host of destitute, angry or confused characters longing to express themselves through some form of personal or emotional climax, and never quite reaching spiritual absolution, due to their refusal or inability to make peace with their community.

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<sup>173</sup> O'Flaherty, *I went to Russia*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

## O'Flaherty's "empire of the mind"

The purpose of O'Flaherty's art is to resolve the conflict within the soul of the author and so his whole artistic life is driven by a need to find purpose to his existence and to disconnect himself from the bleakness and nihilism expressed in much of his writing. The nature of Irish society and politics was not something which O'Flaherty believed he could change outright through his fiction; he saw in the oppressive nature of his surroundings the perfect opportunity for the writer to vent his anger at a universal system which denied the artist the full recognition and acceptance of his community. As a young man, he had been powerfully influenced by political ideologies such as Darwinism, Socialism and Communism and believed that life was an essential struggle for betterment or perfection where the individual was forever battling against the fear of annihilation and oblivion. The art form itself was the most potent symbol of man's struggle for omniscience. In *Shame the Devil* he asserts such a philosophy:

Life is an interminable process of one form of life preying on another, from the cow that destroys life in the blade of grass, to the lion that leaps upon a stag in the African forest [. . .] our power to imagine a state of perfection, which we call God and which we are trying to reach. That is the only cliff worth climbing. And if there is no cliff other than a monstrous delusion, which we have deliberately invented in order to protect ourselves against the discovery that annihilation is inevitable, even so it is good to believe in the delusion. God is indeed the protector of the beautiful in spirit against the base and the vulgar. But what is God for me?'<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil*, p. 55-88

The character Skerrett comes to embrace a more nihilistic philosophy: 'that there is no God to reward the just or punish the wicked, nothing beyond the unconquerable earth but the phantasies born of man's fear and man's vanity'.<sup>177</sup> The influence of Nietzsche in works such as *The Will To Power* (1901) is evident, where the philosopher states that the 'Christian way of life is no more than a fantasy [. . .] a means to being happy', which should be concentrated solely on a 'Kingdom of God' which recognises an "inward change in the individual".<sup>178</sup> O'Flaherty learns from Nietzsche that Man is constantly searching for a higher state of perfection and so he believes that the quarrel with his community is inevitable because 'The degree of the individual human being's happiness is in direct ratio to the degree of his struggle against his environment'.<sup>179</sup>

If the preoccupation with nihilism is present in O'Flaherty's writing, there is also an 'agnostic' feeling or uncertainty about the existence of God ('if there is no cliff other than a monstrous delusion') and so it is necessary to view his literature as an attempt to question man's potential, to reach some moral and philosophical conclusion on the matter.<sup>180</sup> He ponders the 'futility' of prescribed 'philosophies and religions', insisting that 'the scoffer and the sceptic are sour and useless citizens, esteemed only by decadents and invalids' because they fail to establish 'harmony

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<sup>177</sup> O'Flaherty, *Skerrett*, p. 204.

<sup>178</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 'Book Two: Critique of Highest Values', translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, Random House, Inc., 1968), pp. 98-99.

<sup>179</sup> O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil*, p. 129.

<sup>180</sup> O'Flaherty claims in 'an autobiographical note' that from 'the age of fifteen [he was] a complete agnostic', 'A bibliography of the first editions of Liam O'Flaherty', The National Library of Ireland, Dublin, typescript MS 26,743, p. 1.

between their reason and their actions [and] lose the power to create beauty'.<sup>181</sup> It is interesting that he received a Christian blessing at the end of his life, which might illustrate the more spiritual aspects of his mind and fiction, a battle against what MacIntyre describes as the 'grave disorder' of moral thought, as far as the self is concerned. As John Hildebidle admits, there is always consideration for the more positive features of life: 'Against the world repeatedly portrayed in his novels, a world of interlocking betrayals, terror and predation, failed or perverted love, and utterly ineffective intentions, he insists upon life, upon human energy, upon the imaginative intellect. The nihilist and antihumanist in O'Flaherty cannot quite win out'.<sup>182</sup>

There are clear inconsistencies in the author's works. At times he appears to express a desire for humanitarian ideals and freedom in the life of all subjects: 'for each individual, the expression of his personality to a satisfactory degree is the conquest of the world', and he admits that he is only 'unhappy' when 'forced by the encroachments of society to change [his] course from the limitless circuit of [his] brooding', a reflection of his quarrel with community.<sup>183</sup> In other instances, he seems to undermine projections of universal equality, asserting: 'I can never understand the point of view of those who make a fetish of insisting that all men are equal [. . .] Dostoievsky said that when a man becomes imbued with an altruistic love, in theory, for the human race, it is a sure sign that he has become an utter scoundrel, a

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<sup>181</sup> O'Flaherty, *I Went to Russia*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>182</sup> John Hildebidle, *Five Irish Writers: The Errand of Keeping Alive*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>183</sup> O'Flaherty, *Two Years*, pp. 12-14.



false and selfish ruffian'.<sup>184</sup> This feeling is ironically weighed against a fierce condemnation of 'the inevitable poverty, inevitable slavery' of the human condition and his castigation of societal degradation:<sup>185</sup>

There is only one great torture in life. That is hunger. Without having experienced hunger perhaps it is difficult to experience happiness [. . .]  
[I have] the most utter contempt for society. Satisfaction is only found in simplicity. And it is very rare that simplicity can be bought.<sup>186</sup>

Joyce's letter to Nora in which he speaks of his contempt for 'the ignobleness and slavishness of people' and 'the simplicity' at the heart of his writing is worth recalling here, in the same way that Yeats expresses an interest in 'entire sincerity'.<sup>187</sup> It is also in this sense that the writer's art can be seen to relate to our next author, Patrick Kavanagh (Chapter 3), a man who devoted his life to the search for 'simplicity' within the self. O'Flaherty, like Kavanagh, had direct experience of the effects of spiritual and emotional suffering in the life of the artist and he was well aware of the stress poverty played in such drama.

The central connection between all artists is that they rely on writing as a release from the complexities and contradictions of their personalities and the tensions experienced within a particular setting and community. They recognise the inevitability of a kind of slave mentality which denies the individual liberty to

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 158-159.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>186</sup> From Liam O'Flaherty's typescript letter to Iris Barry on Nov 12, 1928, MS 33,719, Acc. 4343, The National Library of Ireland.

<sup>187</sup> See Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and The Masks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), p. 5.

express through the medium of his craft, but also that the art form can be used as a mode of escape, in O'Flaherty's own words: 'that man is great who is his own God and the slave man is a harnessed lout who jingles the coppers of his hire in the scales of mediocrity'.<sup>188</sup> What he inherits from both Yeats and Joyce is an unswerving belief in an inner being, an affirmation of his own distinct Irish identity and selfhood. It is a virtual obsession with how art is viewed by his contemporaries and of the need for it to be accepted and understood as a way of understanding human nature (as he learned from Maupassant and Dostoevsky), of recognising the realities of the self within a particular environment, which in Irish terms often involves the presentation of violence and conflict as a part of society. It is the writer's fundamental need to understand this reality. There is no acceptance in O'Flaherty's mind of the self as a mere artificial construct because it is more a matter of feeling and instinct from within, the passion which is at the heart of the individual writer in defiance of such things as human greed, materialism, or 'mediocrity'.

He recognises, like Yeats, the connection between man and nature and an Irish self which is shaped and defined by the landscape. This is apparent in the intimate memories of the freedom of the countryside which are never far from the mind of Gypo Nolan; it can also be found in the 'immense' power of nature present in *The Black Soul* or in short stories such as 'The Wave' (1924), no doubt inspired by the author's recollections of Dun Aengus on the Aran Islands.<sup>189</sup> The earth can also

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<sup>188</sup> O'Flaherty, *Joseph Conrad: An Appreciation* (London: E. Lahr, 1925), p. 11.

<sup>189</sup> O'Flaherty, 'The Wave', *Liam O'Flaherty's Short Stories: Volume 1*, p. 17.

have destructive consequences, as in the novel *Famine* (1937), where the forces of nature are responsible for the plight of all characters, and the people rely entirely upon the potato crop for survival. It is also present in 'Spring Sowing' (1924) where we see the character Martin Delaney struggling to overcome the elements 'as if some primeval impulse were burning within his brain and driving out every other desire but that of asserting his manhood and of subjugating the earth'.<sup>190</sup>

In this sense the individual personality is destined to struggle against the powers and injustices of his community and, for O'Flaherty, this is an accurate definition of self: the need to express who and what we are in response to environment. The experiences of travelling, working in different professions, courting relationships and the great variety of artistic output are testimony to this fact and that the author's position in Irish literature is unique and secure. Having been actively involved in the political revolution in Ireland, his writing has a certain basis in reality and fact, so that a restless, vacillating temperament is instilled into the lives of the many characters he created. He also wrote extensively in the Gaelic language and advocated early in his career for a culture in 'art, in literature, in architecture' which 'must begin at home', proving that he was willing to explore the nature of 'Irishness' in its various forms.<sup>191</sup> After being criticised by some readers and fellow authors for not writing strictly in Gaelic, he responded in an article for the *Irish Statesman* in December 1927 that 'English' was his 'first language' and that if

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<sup>190</sup> O'Flaherty, 'Spring Sowing', *Liam O'Flaherty's Short Stories: Volume 1*, p. 9.

<sup>191</sup> O'Flaherty, 'A View of Irish Culture' *Irish Statesman* 2, 20th June 1925.

he continued to write in Irish he would not be able to sustain readership or publication, due to lack of demand from the public.<sup>192</sup>

What O'Flaherty sought more than anything else was some form of resolution to that inevitable conflict between self and community - and he was in no doubt that through the work of art, as he saw it, he could become 'concerned solely with this inner life'.<sup>193</sup> He reflects:

What, then, is the divine destiny of man? I am convinced that the divinity in man's destiny is his struggle towards the perfection of his species to a state of godliness, and that the most perfect types of manhood are always in revolt against the limitations of man's nature, his position on the face of the earth, and his ignorance. Towards the end of remedying these defects in man's structure and powers, good men have always struggled and shall struggle, to cleanse the blurred compass of man's intellect [ . . . ] So must I become if I must win the empire of the mind which has no limits, whose beauties are unfathomable, eternal since they are not chained to time, and terrifying in their mystery.<sup>194</sup>

Through literature O'Flaherty believed he could reach a state of transcendence beyond the essential anxieties of existence and he hoped to find a resolution to his troubles. In the endless struggle with his community he longed for a kind of Nietzschean independence, a metaphorical 'empire of the mind', which would lead him to a closer understanding of his own nature and the world around him.

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<sup>192</sup> O'Flaherty, 'Writing in Gaelic' *Irish Statesman* 9, 17th December 1927.

<sup>193</sup> O'Flaherty, *Two Years*, p. 220.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216-219.

### Chapter 3: Kavanagh's artistic soul: 'the self as illustration'

'We are largely responsible for our own lives and the fault, dear Brutus, is not in the stars but in ourselves, that we are underlings',

Patrick Kavanagh, *'Studies in the Technique of Poetry'* (1956).

Patrick Kavanagh was one of the most controversial Irish poets of the last century. His outspoken, Falstaffian nature gave him the ability to turn into an abrupt Captain MacMorris, and sometimes to reveal the wisdom of Polonius. Never afraid to speak his mind and lash out at the corruption, mediocrity and foolishness of his contemporaries, he was also willing to admit his mistakes on the great stage of life, accepting that his quarrel with society was a deliberate act, and that his personal misfortunes were, in the manner of Cassius, his own 'fault'.<sup>1</sup> If his literature has an important message it is that the writer must choose 'honesty' rather than conformity to a particular style, tradition or attitude which is popular with the public. In essence, he must always remain true to the spirit of the individual personality and to his unique sense of self, which in this chapter will be defined as inseparable from the soul of the artist. Kavanagh's pursuit of art and 'knowledge' was, for this reason, a form of 'power' in the way that 'other people' specifically related to him as a distinct personality or 'self', and his quarrel with community stems from the refusal to

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<sup>1</sup> Kavanagh often talks about how he was personally responsible for his own misfortunes, as in his relationship with the Revival: 'It was all my fault. What was I doing there? Wasn't I old enough to have cottoned on? Ah well, we live and we sometimes learn', Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Pruse*, (Worcester and London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), p. 15. The original broadcast of 'Self Portrait' appeared on RTÉ on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1962.

deviate from any pathway that was not felt to be his own. There was no way that the poet or artist could be wrong about anything if he were willing to express exactly what he felt from within or how he viewed the world around him, as he once illustrated:

In the presence of a poet and his moral challenge there are no neutrals - those who are not with him are against him. This similarity with the Christian faith is remarkable: and it was G. K. Chesterton [who] pointed out that Christianity, like poetry, was a sundering sword.

The poet from his seat on Parnassus delivers his judgement and little men hate him for it.<sup>2</sup>

Through closer analysis of these lines we discover parallels with Flaubert's or Joyce's sense of the artist at a stage 'beyond or above his handiwork'.<sup>3</sup> The poet's 'Parnassian power' allows him elevated status apart from his community, but there is something different about Kavanagh's vision. The sense of distance is not comforting or 'refined' in the way that it is for Joyce, and there appears to be no escape from that burning sense of resentment towards other parties. The aloofness of the writer is certainly in keeping with O'Flaherty's assessment, where the quarrel with others identifies 'those little men' who are forever destined to 'hate' or remain in conflict with the writer. The poet is often battling against individuals and groups in Irish society: farmers, writers, lay people, politicians, each of whom appear unwilling to recognise his special entitlement as an artist and the delivery of the

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, *Extracts from ten lectures delivered at University College Dublin in 1956 "Studies in the Technique of Poetry"*, Lecture 10, *November Haggard: Uncollected Prose and Verse of Patrick Kavanagh* (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1971), p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 181.

'truth' as a kind of 'judgement', where Kavanagh becomes 'the unacknowledged legislator of the world'.<sup>4</sup> The writer within him feels he must target those who are unwilling to view art, life and literature as he sees it, to respect the virtual 'infallibility' of his position.

There is a deeper historical dimension to this vision and it is primarily the link to 'the Christian faith', its relationship to the self and the 'moral challenge' of the poet. Concerns about morality and the spiritual life are central to an understanding of Kavanagh's writing and although he feels this inwardly, it is a belief which is inherited from other artists and thinkers before him. We find this sense of the poet's moral authority throughout the history of Western philosophy, beginning with Plato, who makes a direct connection between human understanding of identity and the good. It takes a more central focus in later Christian theology in the idea of the individual soul and its relationship to God, as revealed in the *Confessions* of St Augustine. Kavanagh's art must be considered in relation to a tradition of thought which recognises the poet as a kind of philosopher or moral spokesman, as some form of 'theologian'.<sup>5</sup> The reaction is against the corruption of the individual (the self and soul), the existing false pretensions of contemporary society, and towards the discovery of a universal moral certainty which Kavanagh instinctively feels, and this is what he calls the poet's 'kink of rectitude', or being 'fated to live' with the truth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> P. B. Shelley's famous assertion in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), cited in ed. Duncan Wu, *Romanticism: An Anthology, Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, 1994), p. 956.

<sup>5</sup> Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Pruse*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Kavanagh, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', *Collected Pruse*, p. 230.

When O'Flaherty speaks of poetry he refers to it as 'a lust rather than that spiritual love of which the priest and nuns [. . .] preach to us'.<sup>7</sup> Kavanagh recognises the sentiment or the instinctual passion it creates, agreeing with the novelist that there is a certain joy and sadness associated with writing, that 'you have to be in a pleasant happy mood' in order to create, and somehow 'transmute' all feelings of 'suffering and misfortune' into happiness.<sup>8</sup> The difference between the two artists is that for Kavanagh poetry is related directly to the religious life. He does not doubt his faith in the way that O'Flaherty wavers; in fact it becomes his main strength as a writer and it is integral to his artistic development and the sense of his own being. His art is a quest for some form of Augustinian order, a search for 'love' through the inner truth in man ('In Interiore Hominine').<sup>9</sup> He is at heart a believer in a God, whether it is the 'Gods of poetry', in the celebration of 'sound and stone' and 'the immortal in things mortal', or the deliberate belief in a divinity ('He hides/In no humanitarian disguise'), so that his particular Catholic upbringing becomes inseparable from his personal identity, and his writing.<sup>10</sup>

Steeped in his faith, like Joyce, Kavanagh asserts both the positive and negative influences of his religion on his state of mind and art, admitting:

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<sup>7</sup> Liam O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981), p. 242.

<sup>8</sup> Kavanagh, 'An Interview', *November Haggard*, p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> Citation from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 129.

<sup>10</sup> 'On Raglan Road' (*Irish Press* 3 Oct.1946); 'On Looking into E.V. Rieu's Homer' (*The Bell* Nov. 1951) and 'God in Woman' (*The Bell* Nov.1951), all selected from ed. Peter Kavanagh, *Patrick Kavanagh: The Complete Poems* (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1972), pp. 187-238.



I am a Catholic though not of the Lourdes-Fatima variety. And though I believe that, accepted pragmatically, Catholicism is the perfect measuring rule for every human endeavour, yet I must state that the brand of Catholicism taught in the poverty-stricken part of the country I grew up was defective, especially in its teaching on such matters as sex. The teaching was narrow, flattering the poor and the halfstarved. The Roman Catholic religion as taught then and, indeed, as it is taught today belongs to democracy, to journalism—not to poetry and aristocracy as was its nature at one time.<sup>11</sup>

The tensions within the mind of Kavanagh are certainly evident from his statements about the nature of 'Catholicism': his artistic mentality appreciates the mental, intellectual and spiritual impact of his religion, but he is also critical of its impact and severity, with the presence of 'the chapel pressing its low ceiling over [him]', as it appears to Patrick Maguire in *The Great Hunger* (1942).<sup>12</sup> We find this feeling shared by many Irish writers, notably Joyce and O'Flaherty, the latter of whom mirrors frustrations about the 'growth' of a 'democracy' which ensures that 'literature' ceases 'to be an art'.<sup>13</sup> It is also a significant concern for the artists who follow Kavanagh - novelists like John McGahern or Kate and Edna O'Brien, who each express a similar preoccupation with the Church's attitude to sexuality. The individual's spiritual or personal feelings and beliefs seem too often in conflict with the authoritarian or Jansenist teachings of the Church and this is something which Kavanagh outlines personally in works such as *Lough Derg*, a landmark poem in his life and career.

The quarrel between individuals and their religion does not prove

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<sup>11</sup> Kavanagh, 'Autobiography', *November Haggard*, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Collected Poems', p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> O'Flaherty, *I went to Russia*, pp. 9-10.

irreconcilable to Kavanagh. If he is at times critical of the Church and its attitude to certain taboos, literature or creative expression, he is also willing to recognise the deeply spiritual context for his writing. In private letters he describes poetry as being 'more religious than prayer' and he often makes a direct connection between his art and the Holy Spirit, referring to poetry as 'a piece of earth in which the Holy Ghost is manifest'.<sup>14</sup> He cannot share Joyce's 'rejection' of his religion as an oppressive, foreign influence or servitude to be cast out, simply because he engages in the ceremonies of the Church throughout his life, attends a pilgrimage to Lough Derg in the early 1940s and refuses to leave Ireland officially.<sup>15</sup> It could be argued that for this reason he fails to achieve a kind of Joycean self-mastery from his native land, and from his art, seemingly encumbered by both the insular and 'mystical' aspects of his faith.

Kavanagh makes a distinction between the existence of an 'aristocracy' within Catholicism which favoured 'poetry' in the past and the now prevailing draconian nature of his society and religion. In this way his philosophy, although mainly in conflict with the Yeatsian tradition, establishes a startling connection with it: a desire for a more sophisticated appreciation of the arts, which appears to be unrecognisable

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick describes this in two letters to his sister Celia, one dated Autumn 1933 and the other September 14<sup>th</sup> 1933, ed. Peter Kavanagh, *Lapped Furrows: Correspondence 1933-1967 between Patrick and Peter Kavanagh: with other documents* (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1969), p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> There is debate within academia about whether or not the author actually left the Church, due to Joyce's following remark: 'That's for the Church to say', see ed., A. Nicholas Fargnoli and Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Critical Companion to James Joyce: A Literary Reference to his Life and Work* (New York: Fact on File Inc, 2006), p. 5.

in the modern world, or at least failing in the midst of the poet's creativity.<sup>16</sup> In *Kavanagh's Weekly* (April-July 1952) he asserts that 'there is practically no literary public in this country [Ireland] and there has never been a literary tradition'.<sup>17</sup> This does not prevent him from voicing his approval and pride (in the same article) about the work and accomplishments of his predecessors:

Whatever prestige Ireland has, has been won for us by a few celebrated writers — Joyce, Yeats, O'Casey and others. Otherwise Ireland would hardly have been heard of. Our public officials have done nothing to make us respected.<sup>18</sup>

In the final edition of *Kavanagh's Weekly* (July 5, 1952), the quarrel with 'public officials' reaches its climax when Kavanagh outlines how all sections of Irish society have been afflicted by 'Despair', and it is a particular lack of 'hope' within the community which breeds a culture of 'cynical disbelief'.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of art is 'to give people an enthusiasm for life, to draw their attention to the wonder of the fields, of the weeds', and therefore without the poet's hope and courage in life and the lack of a 'spiritual basis for literature [. . .] There would be no Shakespeare, no Homer, nor a Saint Thomas Aquinas'.<sup>20</sup> His concerns about a lack of funding and financial support for his journal from the general public force him to admit that 'An

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<sup>16</sup> Oona Frawley is one critic who implies that Kavanagh shares connections with the Yeatsian tradition, see 'Kavanagh and the Irish Pastoral Tradition', ed. Stan Smith, *Irish Writers in Their Time: Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> 'What is Truth?' *Kavanagh's Weekly*, Vol 1. No. 3 (April 26, 1952), article entitled 'Literature', p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 'The Story of an Editor who was Corrupted by Love', Vol. 1 No. 13., Saturday (July 5, 1952), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

audience makes a writer as much as a writer makes an audience [. . .] It is the need of the audience which creates the voice', and so he openly recognises that the writer is somehow born out of the quarrel with others.<sup>21</sup> Here he also seems to share O'Flaherty's frustrations about the growing 'sickness' of democracy, where general lethargy or indifference to art ensures that the community 'at rest' appears in a state of 'decay'.<sup>22</sup>

His praise of more recent Irish writers is most significant because he is best remembered for his reaction against Yeats' Celtic Twilight, as in the essay entitled 'William Butler Yeats', where he specifically outlines his objection to the poet's life and personality:

[T]here is one facet of the poet's life [Yeats] that few people have discussed—his desperate desire to be thought Irish and one of the People. Nobody will deny that he was Irish of a certain kind—a noble kind, his father was a wonderful man—yet he himself was always conscious of being something of an outsider [. . .] As Plato tells us in the person of Socrates a man cannot desire what he has got. Joyce had it. Joyce, as he himself says, was 'Irish, all too Irish'.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of his reservations about Yeats, Kavanagh comes to recognise his 'authority' as a poet, arguing that in *Last Poems* he acquires 'his own serene authoritative self'.<sup>24</sup> He also shares Yeats' 'aristocratic' or Platonic notions about literature, although he is reluctant to admit that Yeatsian connection with 'the common man', insisting: 'I am not one of those who think that a brilliant poet

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 1

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Kavanagh, 'William Butler Yeats', *Collected Prose*, p. 254.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

should be accessible to the ordinary people. No, in the words of Ezra Pound, Yeats's great friend [. . .] "the lordliest of the arts and the solace of lonely men" was not created for the amusement of the ignorant man on the street'.<sup>25</sup> These mixed feelings make it rather difficult to place Kavanagh's art, especially when we consider that he is also very much concerned with what he calls 'the miracle of ordinary life'.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the conflict which emerges within the writer's mind is initially concerned with the humble status he occupies as a peasant tied to a particular community and religious tradition, as he comes to accept in later life:

My childhood experience was the usual barbaric life of the Irish country poor. I have never seen poverty properly analysed. Poverty is a mental condition. You hear of men and women who have chosen poverty, but you cannot choose poverty. Poverty has nothing to do with eating your fill today; it is anxiety about what's going to happen next week.<sup>27</sup>

The same fear haunted O'Flaherty's conscience in his letter to Iris Barry, a recognition that true 'happiness' could only be found through a sense of self-realisation of the value of one's existence. In his case the 'torture' of 'hunger', or 'Poverty' was an experience in living.<sup>28</sup> This becomes a similar problem for Kavanagh, who sees it as 'a mental condition', where 'the barbaric way in which [he] was brought up' seems to plague him endlessly, something that urges him to keep fighting for the justice of his position, to struggle for self-preservation and survival

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick in a letter to Peter Kavanagh on '1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in August, 1947', offering advice on the teaching of poetry, selected from *Lapped Furrows*, p. 111.

<sup>27</sup> Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Prose*, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> As outlined in Liam O'Flaherty's typescript letter to Iris Barry, Nov 12, 1928, MS 33, 719, Acc. 4343, The National Library of Ireland.

in a world that seems to somehow deny his place or voice within it.<sup>29</sup> It is the psychological suffering which creates the art.<sup>30</sup> This is illustrated in *The Green Fool* (1938) when, 'hungry for poetry', Kavanagh visits George Russell's residence in Dublin and is barely able to concentrate on AE's philosophical discussion, due to self-consciousness about his impoverished appearance ('He appeared quite certain that I was a beggar'). He then becomes distracted by physical hunger, adding that 'an empty stomach is a great egoist [. . .] a bad listener to anything save the fizz of rashers on a pan'.<sup>31</sup> Una Agnew considers Kavanagh's 'mystical imagination' in such contexts, suggesting that 'beneath the coat of a beggar there may lurk a hidden mystic', a man who uses poetry as the 'vehicle of his spirituality', to help give authentic expression to his personality and identity.<sup>32</sup>

The efforts the poet pursues to expose the truth about his life and his relationship with others are challenged by the fact that he lives in a litigious environment, amongst people who ultimately resent the exploration of their inner worlds and personalities. The first setback of Kavanagh's career came after the quarrel with Oliver St. Gogarty and the libel action taken against *The Green Fool*, which the author claimed 'destroyed the momentum' or his enthusiasm as a young writer. Some critics argue that the creation of some of the poet's finest literature after 1938 seems to undermine the claim that *The Green Fool* debacle proved to be a major

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<sup>29</sup> Kavanagh, 'Autobiography', *November Haggard*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> '[A]lthough the areas of suffering, even starvation, are substantial they are still only streaks in the general pattern [. . .] Out of this idyllic world I came into a useless struggle', Kavanagh, 'Suffering and Literature', *Collected Prose*, pp. 277-279.

<sup>31</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, pp. 228-229.

<sup>32</sup> Una Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1998), p. 11.

setback.<sup>33</sup> The hardships of his youth and the poverty of his upbringing are perhaps not as blatant or as serious as they appear for others within his community. The Kavanagh family actually managed to purchase a new and modern dwelling in 1926, saving enough money to buy the neighbouring Reynold's farm in 'Shancoduff', but this did not prevent the poet from recalling the old life of poverty and degradation.<sup>34</sup>

Born in Inniskeen, County Monaghan in 1904, Kavanagh was the son of a cobbler and small farmer. He left school at the age of 13 and at first appeared destined to work in his father's trade. He felt uneasy about the prospect of such a life, never quite feeling that he 'belonged' within his parish due to his artistic sensibility, echoing the Joycean sentiment of isolation from the mob in the sense that as a poet he remained 'detached, remote' and 'never one of the people'.<sup>35</sup> This preoccupation with what has gone on before and with what seems to co-exist with Kavanagh, appears to haunt and charge him with an energy which reacts fundamentally against the 'outsider' mentality, increasingly in his case because of his own sense of distance and ostracism from others. He realises that this position is entirely necessary because the poet often represents an 'anarchic' personality, one that does not conform to 'the narrow limits set by society [. . .] a view based on a true sense of values and those values must be of their nature what are called unworldly', and therefore profoundly spiritual. Kavanagh shares Yeats', Joyce's and O'Flaherty's concern with the poet's function—he belongs, as Yeats put it, to the 'priesthood' of a

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<sup>33</sup> See John Nemo, *Patrick Kavanagh* (London: G. K. Hall and Co., 1979), p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> This is supported by the memoirs of Kavanagh's sister Celia, 'Introduction', *Lapped Furrows*, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Prose*, p. 15.

‘forgotten faith’.<sup>36</sup>

The ‘eccentric’ notion of the poet as reactor against the ‘limits’ of society often leads to the common misconception that Kavanagh’s literature is ‘an untidy affair’, carelessly compiled and haphazard in nature, and this is something that needs to be questioned.<sup>37</sup> If he is conscious of his own ‘disorganised sort of life’, he is also capable of producing sophisticated literature such as *The Great Hunger* (1942) and *Tarry Flynn* (1948).<sup>38</sup> As late as 6<sup>th</sup> July 1957, Kavanagh wrote to his brother Peter: ‘most idiotic people quite insincerely made me out to be a wild, impulsive man. The truth is that I have ever been a reasoner’.<sup>39</sup> The fact that the poet was rumoured to be volatile and erratic in personality, that he was often rejected by contemporary writers and mocked by the established literati in Dublin, leads to certain prejudices in judgement. Archival records suggest a more reflective personality, a man and poet who appeared compassionate, mentally organised and prolific in his journalism, poetry and prose. He was believed to be considerate towards family members and friends.<sup>40</sup> Through his art, Kavanagh succeeded in creating a new understanding of what it meant to be a writer in Irish society, that it was possible for someone who was not in any way connected to Irish literary life to suddenly ‘burst a

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<sup>36</sup> Kavanagh, ‘The Irish Tradition’, *Collected Pruse*, pp. 232-233; W. B. Yeats, ‘Ireland and the Arts’, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), p. 320.

<sup>37</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ‘Life and Work: The Poetics of Sincerity’, and Alex Davis, ‘Kavanagh’s Poetics and Prose: Against Formulae’, ed. Stan Smith, *Irish Writers in their Time: Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 21-39.

<sup>38</sup> From ‘Auditor’s In’: ‘And yet you live without a wife/A most disorganised sort of life’.

<sup>39</sup> Kavanagh’s letter is published in *Lapped Furrows*, p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> Kavanagh’s compassionate nature and humanity are recorded in the memoirs of his sister, Cecilia (Celia), present in *Lapped Furrows*, p. 20.



road' into the world of literature.<sup>41</sup>

It is important not to dwell extensively on the 'Irishness' of Kavanagh's writing, which he frequently denounces as 'a form of anti-art'.<sup>42</sup> By this he is defining the 'morality of the poet' and, like Doctor Johnson, expressing reservations about a nationalistic or patriotic agenda for writing.<sup>43</sup> Kavanagh's actions in early life suggest a rebellious nature which is sympathetic to the Republican cause, but he insists that great art is more concerned with human nature, with the self and soul of the individual, than it is to do with place or environment.<sup>44</sup> True, his literature portrays the life of a poet and his various quarrels with particular people and institutions, whether it is in relation to the native parish at home or in the city of Dublin, and so it must also be considered within such contexts. On the other hand, it cannot be confined to these settings alone, because the expression of self and personality are paramount: 'The power of literature,' he informs us, 'derives from its being concerned with the individual, with the things that are of no importance to newspapers and politicians'.<sup>45</sup>

The intention here is to explore a new avenue of thought in Kavanagh, in particular how novels such *The Green Fool* and *Tarry Flynn*, and his prose articles and

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<sup>41</sup> Kavanagh, 'Literature and the Universities', *Collected Pruse*, p. 238.

<sup>42</sup> Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Pruse*, p. 16

<sup>43</sup> Kavanagh expresses this argument in various sources. The comment on Johnson and 'the morality of the poet' documents his 'reservations about Yeats' and that 'No true poet ever wrote for the ordinary man and woman'. This can be found in The Kavanagh Archive at University College Dublin, KAV/B/24 (5a) - typescript.

<sup>44</sup> Kavanagh refers to his involvement with the Republicans during the Irish Civil War in *The Green Fool*, pp.129-138. He often questions 'the virtue of a place' and claims that art is frequently used for the purposes of propaganda amongst people 'pretending to have an interest in poetry', see 'Self Portrait', *Collected Pruse*, pp. 16-20.

<sup>45</sup> Kavanagh, 'Signposts', *Collected Pruse*, p. 27.

unpublished works present in the archives, help to shape or capture the poet at the heart of the personality, and reveal a prevailing need to preserve the integrity of the soul, effectively moulding the writer's sense of his true self. That Kavanagh was foremost a poet rather than a novelist is self-evident, for in virtually all of his fiction he has a central poet-farmer or versifier who expresses the inner life of the artist. Through characterisation and setting, whether in his poetry or his prose, he effectively dispels Thomas Gray's myth that the great writer could be someone lost to history due to the poverty of his upbringing.

If the writer's position appears unique it is likely to be heightened by the fact that his humble origins in rural Ireland identify with a particular mentality or existence which recognises the value in common life, a love of family, community and the farming tradition. Kavanagh explores a sense of self in Irish literature and history which is based on the reality of individual experience, both within the Irish fields and landscape and in the literary world of the metropolis, in such a way that he reveals the essential humanity and ordinariness of man and poet. This feeling is especially significant for Heaney who believes that Kavanagh expresses an 'individual sense of himself' which is always in conflict and appears apart from others. Paraphrasing some lines from Kavanagh's poem, 'Temptation in Harvest', Heaney explains that 'his place was to a large extent his subject [. . .] his quarrel with himself was the quarrel between himself and it, between the illiterate self that was tied to the little hills and earthed in the stony grey soil, and the literate self that

pined for 'the city of Kings/Where art, music and letters were the real things'.<sup>46</sup>

Heaney recognises his own life and poetic sensibility in Kavanagh's poetry because it links 'the farm life which produced us with the slim-volume world we were now supposed to be fit for. He brought us back to what we came from'.<sup>47</sup> He also identifies a major transition in Kavanagh's early poetry from a point where he is literally rooted in the soil of Monaghan, to the later feeling of detachment from others, a move into 'the placeless heaven' of the imagination.<sup>48</sup> Here the poet remains 'afloat above his native domain, airborne in the midst of his own dream place rather than earthbound in a literal field',<sup>49</sup> as Heaney explains by examining the final stanza of Kavanagh's late poem, 'Auditor's In':

I turn away to where the self reposes  
The placeless heaven that's under all our noses  
Where we're shut off from all the barren anger  
No time for self-pitying melodrama.<sup>50</sup>

In the end Kavanagh is happy to 'float away on wings like Joyce's', escaping from the tensions of the moment and stumbling upon his true 'self at the end of a tortuous

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<sup>46</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Sense of Place', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 137. Kavanagh's actual lines read: 'Over the field to the City of the Kings/Where art, music, letters are the real things?' Heaney frequently talked about Kavanagh's influence on his poetry. In 'Topic', broadcast on RTÉ (December 1967), he described being introduced to 'The Great Hunger' by the schoolmaster Michael McLaverty in 1962. Heaney claimed that having access to this poem 'was like reading into my own life [. . .] Kavanagh, at that time, taught me the courage of my own experience'.

<sup>47</sup> Heaney, 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh', *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Heaney, 'The Placeless Heaven', *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Kavanagh, 'Auditor's In', *The Complete Poems*, p. 245.

road'.<sup>51</sup> His whole life is a search for a release from the complexities of his experiences within 'the sour soil of a town', a desire, like O'Flaherty, for some form of cathartic relief from the quarrel with others, and yet with Kavanagh it almost seems as if the conflict between self and community is deliberate, perhaps in order to bring to the attention of others the spiritual values he holds most sacred, his belief that 'the men who express the soul of a people can never toe the party line'.<sup>52</sup> The core values of the poet, his desire for 'honesty' and 'sincerity' through art, are sometimes taken for granted because Kavanagh's 'quarrel' often appears as a simple case of a lone poet fighting against others in society. John Nemo has recorded Kavanagh's early feelings in private moments, reflecting on the need to 'study our real selves', and arguing that in his later poetry he underwent a transformation leading to 'a renewed quest for the self'.<sup>53</sup> He agrees that poetry for Kavanagh relates to the religious life, noting: '[he] maintained that only a simple, direct statement of common, ordinary experience was the proper response for the poetic artist. Above all, he stressed that poetry was a profoundly religious experience, with the poet serving as an artistic theologian'.<sup>54</sup>

What requires more examination is what Kavanagh really meant when he referred to 'the self' or the 'artistic theologian', and how exactly it was intimately related to the spiritual life. The poet's personal struggle and experiences of life in

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> From Patrick Kavanagh, 'Autobiographical Prose', *Almost Everything*, recorded in Ireland by An Comhlacht Taifeadadh Tta, for Claddagh Records Ltd., on October 16<sup>th</sup> 1963.

<sup>53</sup> Nemo is here referring to Kavanagh's comments in a notebook he was using in 1924, cited in John Nemo, *Patrick Kavanagh* (London: G. K. Hall and Co., 1979), p. 114.

<sup>54</sup> John Nemo, *Patrick Kavanagh*, p. 115.

Ireland connect him with a modern tradition of writers such as Yeats, Joyce and O'Flaherty, although there are others influences on his art, notably Shakespeare and the ancient Greek philosophers. As he admits in 'The Defeated': 'The greatest sage/May not reject his people's heritage'.<sup>55</sup> His search is not really to 'solve the riddle/Of Man and God', but certainly to illustrate faith in the divinity and the arts, to find happiness in 'the pure positive', dancing 'To the music of a melodeon' whilst always looking back at the 'genius' who 'Walks with feet rooted in the native soil'.<sup>56</sup>

The sense of having 'roots' in a particular landscape is something Kavanagh loves and uses to his advantage, allowing for the fact that it forces him to question his identity, his relationship with community.<sup>57</sup> The family base in Inniskeen may give him a recognisable voice in Irish society, what Heidegger would call a sense of being in the world as an '*authentic Self*', but these feelings of belonging also cause him distress.<sup>58</sup> If living 'authentically' becomes his priority, he is also torn between opposites: the love of farming, poetry and peasant existence, and recognition that his art is not appreciated by others or that the 'stony grey soil of Monaghan' has the power to kill the creativity within him ('O green-life-conquering plough').<sup>59</sup> He feels he must remain true to his own nature and react against the false pretensions of his

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<sup>55</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Defeated', *The Complete Poems*, p. 248

<sup>56</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Defeated' and the quotation 'pure positive' is selected from 'Auditors In', p. 245.

<sup>57</sup> Kavanagh often questions the 'business of having one's roots in the soil', and suggests that this really means 'roots in experience, in love', 'On a Liberal Education', *November Haggard*, p. 82.

<sup>58</sup> Martin Heidegger writes about the difference between 'the *authentic Self* [. . .] that way of interpreting the world and Being-in-the-world which lies closest' and 'that of inauthenticity and failure to stand by One's Self,' trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), pp. 166-167.

<sup>59</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Stony Grey Soil', *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2005), ed. Antoinette Quinn, p. 38.

society, and so his peasant origins become a form of attack against those who would seek to diminish his image as a mere 'upstart poet' with 'roots in the soil'.<sup>60</sup> This conflict is predominantly with the Yeatsian tradition and what he considers to be the Irish writer's obsession with an unrealistic or romantic image of Ireland as a 'spiritual entity'. He publicly scoffs at Yeats' privileged Anglo-Irish connections, believing that his 'phoney' agenda derives not from the 'heart' but more from a willingness to exploit the favours of the multitude, a position rooted in the aloofness of the Big House tradition:

Yes, Yeats, it was damn easy for you protected  
By the middle classes and the Big Houses  
To talk about the sixty-year old public protected  
Man sheltered by the dim Victorian Muses.<sup>61</sup>

Yeats would certainly have challenged such an assessment based on his own personal bitterness regarding the materialism and religiosity of the middle classes. He was extremely proud to be associated with 'Swift, Burke and the Bishop of Cloyne', claiming to be one of 'the last romantics', and celebrating the tradition 'Where wings have memory of wings'.<sup>62</sup> The irony of each writer's position is explored by Heaney when he argues that although Kavanagh 'abjures' Yeats' concern for 'national purpose' in literature, 'his work probably touches the majority of Irish people more immediately' because his insight into country life, 'the authentic

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<sup>60</sup> Kavanagh, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', *Collected Pruse*, p. 223.

<sup>61</sup> Kavanagh, 'Yeats' (1966), *The Complete Poems*, p. 349.

<sup>62</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931' and 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation', *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), p. 148, 44.

speech of those parts', helps to nourish a people's 'sense of themselves in that serious way which Synge talked about in his preface'.<sup>63</sup> In this context, he is, as Seamus Deane contends, 'Irish in a way Yeats is not [. . .] insistently himself' and 'a bare-faced poet [without] masks'.<sup>64</sup>

In Yeats' 'romantic Ireland' Kavanagh senses the danger of being easily manipulated by other people or institutions. He cannot accept that the land he works as a farmer is only there to be romanticised, and he is adamant that the hardships endured in the 'weedy clods' where 'the potato gatherers' move like mechanized scarecrows' is something very real.<sup>65</sup> He recognises the beauty and 'magic of the fields' as something mystical and 'transcendent', but he also believes that there is some 'spiritual' crisis at work and that it is possible if he does not challenge the stereotype of the 'romantic' Irish peasant, that 'the last soul passively like a bag of wet clay' could simply roll down the side of the hill and remain oblivious to history.<sup>66</sup> There is a moral purpose to his art and it is the rejection of his community in Inniskeen, for what it really *is*, that he fundamentally resents. It is not only its 'spiritual' qualities that he wishes to re-examine or dissect; he hopes to erase the revivalist portrait that rural Ireland is a romance unlike anywhere else, the fiction that his society presents few problems for the individual and his soul.

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<sup>63</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Sense of Place', *Preoccupations*, p. 137.

<sup>64</sup> Seamus Deane, 'Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism', ed. Douglas Dunn, *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey* (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1975), p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Great Hunger' (In Part, Horizon Jan. 1943), ed. Peter Kavanagh, *Patrick Kavanagh: The Complete Poems*, pp. 79-81.

<sup>66</sup> Kavanagh describes 'the magic of the fields' in *Tarry Flynn* (1948). He often talks about the poet's 'transcendent power' and the reference to the 'soul' is in 'The Great Hunger', *The Complete Poems*, p. 80.

The quarrel for Kavanagh begins not with the revival, however; it develops firstly from within, with the need to express who and what he is as an individual. The fact that his 'moral' outlook and poetic sensibility is rejected firstly by his community in Inniskeen ensures that the conflict between self and society is deeply ingrained, fuelling his bitterness when he is later dismissed as a poet in Dublin. This battle between the writer's need to express the inner man and his outward resentment of his community become the driving forces of his discontent, creating a life-long sense of ambivalence and quarrel with others, even to the point where he begins to doubt his chosen vocation.<sup>67</sup>

Kavanagh both loves and hates the nature of the poetic life but feels he has no choice but to follow his heart because the need and 'power' to create is within him, it comes naturally to him, in the way it appeared to Keats. He is therefore suspicious of any form of manufacturing in art, of 'poetic Formulae', and shares the love of spontaneity which O'Flaherty preferred to the given style.<sup>68</sup> The poet argues that 'The question of technique is not simply a matter of grammar or syntax or anything as easy as that. It has to do with the mystical. Real technique is a spiritual quality, a condition of mind, or an ability to invoke a particular condition of mind'.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> 'When you begin writing you think everything you do is almost certain of living but as you get older I less and less believe in my own self', 'An Interview', *November Haggard*, p. 91. This lack of confidence does not undermine Kavanagh's spiritual belief in an existing inner core of being which remains with the artist throughout his life.

<sup>68</sup> As expressed by Alex Davis, 'Kavanagh's Poetics and Prose: Against Formulae', ed. Stan Smith, *Irish Writers in their Time: Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp. 39-54.

<sup>69</sup> Kavanagh, Introduction to *Collected Poems*, cited in Daniel Murphy, 'Apocalypse of Clay: Religion in Patrick Kavanagh's Poetry', *Imagination and Religion in Anglo-Irish Literature 1930-1980* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1987), p. 16.



Kavanagh highlights the superiority of a 'parochial' vision over a more 'provincial' mentality which 'does not trust' what the 'eyes see'.<sup>70</sup> His legacy is in the creation of an Irish self which is familiar in Ireland today, a tradition which values the individual personality and also considers the religious or political realities of community.<sup>71</sup>

### **Kavanagh: simplicity and the self**

If doubt is a recognisable part of Kavanagh's artistic journey, his writing is also what he calls 'an illustration' of a self which is real and forever permanent, a spiritual and individual sense of belief in an inner core of being. It is effectively connected to the soul of the artist. He would find it difficult to accept the argument of a philosopher such as David Hume that the self is a non-existent entity, that it is indefinable or a mere 'bundle' of inconstant 'perceptions'.<sup>72</sup> The reason for this is because Kavanagh believes that true art reveals an inner presence and reality which carries with it the 'beatific vision', something that is virtually part of an individual's soul and in itself a manifestation of 'God' in 'the bits and pieces of Everyday'.<sup>73</sup> What he accepts, on the

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<sup>70</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Parish and the Universe,' *Collected Pruse*, p. 282.

<sup>71</sup> This reinforces Heaney's assertion that 'Without being in the slightest way political in its intentions, Kavanagh's poetry did have political effect', 'The Placeless Heaven', p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Part IV, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 252. Hume's view on the nature of the soul is also worth considering here. He argued that 'the question concerning the substance of the soul is absolutely unintelligible', but he also highlighted 'an evident principle, that *whatever we can imagine is possible*' [Italics are Hume's] see ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part IV, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2000), pp. 163-164.

<sup>73</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Great Hunger', *The Complete Poems*, p. 88.

contrary, is that a simple and 'direct' understanding of the self may lead to misrepresentation of writer and society, to a kind of false or dishonest impression, if it does not come from the guttural instincts of the individual person or poet, as he explains in 'Self Portrait':

I dislike talking about myself in a direct way. The self is only interesting as an illustration. For some reason, whenever we talk about our personal lives they turn out to be both irrelevant and untrue — even when the facts are right, the mood is wrong [. . .] The quality that most people fear — and by simple people I mean terrified, ignorant people — is the comic spirit, for the comic spirit is the ultimate sophistication which they do not understand and therefore fear.<sup>74</sup>

The fact that Kavanagh warns of the danger of talking directly about 'the self' can be misleading if the statement is taken as a literal rejection of an individual's inner spirit or presence — and it is very important that his thoughts on this subject are not interpreted in this way. The poet was in no doubt that 'the self' was real and very particular to all of us, wherever or whomever we might be, and he is certainly not advocating in this example a kind of Yeatsian 'anti-self' or the pursuit of something opposite to our own natures in order to reach this greater understanding. In another article he explains this process again: 'There is nothing in the world as hard as to be natural, as being oneself [. . .] The majority of physical things that happen to a man are of no importance; the self is only interesting as an illustration'.<sup>75</sup> This is not meant to be interpreted as personal ego; it is the spiritual aspect of 'the self' that necessarily

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<sup>74</sup> Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Prose*, p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> Kavanagh, 'Teaching What You Already Know', *November Haggard*, p. 104.

becomes his priority. What he really means is that to understand the life of the artist or of the individual's sense of being, we must come to an appreciation of the 'comic spirit', the 'ultimate sophistication', a recognition of the 'weightlessness' and 'simplicity' of human existence which identifies 'the no-caring jag', as he further explains:

There are two kinds of simplicity, the simplicity of going away and the simplicity of return. The last is the ultimate in sophistication. In the final simplicity we don't care whether we appear foolish or not. We talk of things that earlier would embarrass.<sup>76</sup>

'Simplicity' is the motif word with many Irish artists: Yeats, Joyce and O'Flaherty all illustrate its significance in their correspondence and in every context it can be defined as the artist's desire to write for 'the satisfaction of his soul', to connect with the inherent or universal truth about human existence. The writer's purpose, as Kavanagh sees it, is to express a form of self which understands the value of 'simplicity' within the mind, the 'habitual and the banal' surrounding the life of the poet, where 'the things that really matter are casual, insignificant little things, things you would be ashamed to talk of publicly' - the kind of epiphany of which Joyce calls 'a sudden spiritual manifestation'.<sup>77</sup> One of the finest early poems illustrating these 'natural' qualities in Kavanagh's life is called 'Peace', a reflection of sentiment about experiences and emotions from early age:

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<sup>76</sup> Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Pruse*, p. 20.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

And sometimes I am sorry when the grass  
Is growing over the stones in quiet hollows  
And the cocksfoot leans across the rutted cart-pass  
That I am not the voice of country fellows [...]

There's an old plough upside down on a weedy ridge  
And someone is shouldering home a saddle-harrow.  
Out of that childhood country what fools climb  
To fight with tyrants Love and Life and Time?<sup>78</sup>

The emotive quality of these lines fills us with a feeling of calm and nostalgia, most familiar to anyone who has ever lived in the countryside — and the universal message strikes us in the rhyming couplet at the end of the sonnet because all adult readers have 'climbed' out of their own 'childhood countries'. The poet depicts the 'quiet hollows' of the countryside: the senses of sight ('a hare sits looking'), sound ('country voices') and touch ('cockfoot leans [...] someone shouldering') which effectively recreate the little pieces of his world. In the final two lines the quarrel with life (and others) is mentioned almost as a disappointment, as a perfect opposite to the tranquillity and 'peace' of the scene we have already imagined. We are reminded of the poem 'Innocence' in Kavanagh's later life, where it seems that death and conflict are only possible 'outside these whitethorn hedges'.<sup>79</sup> We know this to be an imaginary and somewhat romantic feeling rather than one based on fact, since it is certainly possible to die in the countryside, but it is easy to overlook the sense that the 'whitethorn hedges' are a metaphor for Kavanagh's spiritual life, which he feels will inevitably 'die outside' the peace of his home and natural environment, in

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<sup>78</sup> Kavanagh, 'Peace', *The Complete Poems*, p. 129.

<sup>79</sup> Kavanagh, 'Innocence', *The Complete Poems*, p. 242.

the harsher and more quarrelsome world of the city. It is the universal feeling of hope, security and the reality of his existence which really matters in the end, during a time when he appears perfectly at peace.

The pursuit of 'honesty' in Kavanagh's poetry and writing is sometimes questioned by critics. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews identifies a concern with judging the poet's 'sincerity at times', in considering poems like 'Stony Grey Soil', which he claims 'rewrites the whole Romantic problematic of self-consciousness', insisting:

'At some point, Kavanagh tells us, he lost his youthful capacity to respond directly and passionately to his world, to speak freely. What followed was a fall into doubt and self-division'.<sup>80</sup> Andrews also considers how it is possible to comprehend identity without 'self-consciousness.' If he is suggesting that understanding of the self is 'compromised by its own internal contradictions', there is also the danger of reading too much into what Kavanagh really meant when he talked about it. In fact most writers are products of contradiction and it is their essential desire for release from the tensions within and the external pressures of community which essentially drives their urge to become artists, to resolve the quarrel between self and others. There is certainly a need for reflection when considering one's own identity, of changes in attitude or perspective, but there is also a tradition of thought which considers a real spiritual state — the individual soul connected to every single person.

The problem with traditional criticism about Kavanagh is that his writing is

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<sup>80</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'Life and Work: The Poetics of Sincerity', *Patrick Kavanagh*, p. 36.

often divided into various phases: his initial romantic period in the shadow of the Revival, then the lapse 'into doubt and self-division', followed by the phase of critique and satire, and finally his sudden spiritual rebirth by the banks of the Grand Canal. It is easier for critics to understand the poet in this way, but in fact he mentions in an interview near the end of his life that he is 'beginning to disbelieve' in the whole idea of rebirth and renewal.<sup>81</sup> When Kavanagh reflects on how his early simplicity of feeling and style loses effect in much of his later poetry, this does not mean that he is incapable of restoring the same mood or even that 'simplicity' no longer holds value for him. The temporary 'loss' is in fact part of the writer's belief in a 'fog of unknowing' which he feels surrounds the artist and his community and which he believes he has overcome after the trauma of his operation for lung cancer in 1955, when he learns to 'Grow with nature again' and appreciate 'the green waters of the canal'.<sup>82</sup>

There is certainly greater consistency at the heart of his writing than is traditionally agreed — the love of life, the desire for celebrating the common and banal are generally present throughout his career, especially in his poetry, and despite the poet's complaints about poverty, materialism, loss of the 'no caring jag' and personal frustrations (which we all have), the celebration of art and living remains constant. This search for 'the pure positive' feeling begins in poems of the

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<sup>81</sup> Kavanagh, 'Interview', *November Haggard*, p. 92.

<sup>82</sup> Kavanagh, 'Canal Bank Walk', *The Complete Poems*, p. 294. 'I am afraid this fog of unknowing affected me dreadfully. But, as I have suggested earlier, all this is of little importance', 'Self Portrait', *Collected Prose*, p. 14.

early period such as 'The Intangible' or 'To a Blackbird', where he is 'rapt to stariness' and striving for 'conversion/With the Most High' through to works later in his career like 'Truth' ('the beauty-spell of things uncouth'), 'In Memory of My Mother' ('you smile up at us— eternally'), and 'The Hospital', where he seeks to record 'love's mystery without claptrap' and 'snatch out of time the passionate transitory'.<sup>83</sup> What is often forgotten is that as a poet, at least, Kavanagh shares a certain belief in the Yeatsian 'deep heart's core' but does not seek to expose 'the 'sixty-year-old smiling public man'.<sup>84</sup> He is careful in the end to illustrate his own insignificance in emerging out of the trivialities of country life, declaring that he has 'led a life of no importance [and] must not labour that point or it will become important and the next thing [he] will be conscious of [his] role as a leader with responsibility'.<sup>85</sup>

The irony exists naturally in the permanence of his art: he excels to a stature beyond the ordinary through the creation of his literature and in some way reveals the 'miracle' of his existence as a person and a poet, deliberately teasing out the 'importance' of the little things in life that many of us take for granted, the common objects he illustrates in 'Peace'. This feeling permeates Kavanagh's literature and experiences, beginning with his first publications as a poet. He illustrates the effects

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<sup>83</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Intangible' (1929) and 'To a Blackbird' (1930), *The Complete Poems*, pp. 1-2; 'Truth' (1938), *The Complete Poems*, p. 53; 'In Memory of My Mother' (1945), *The Complete Poems*, p. 160; 'The Hospital' (1955), *The Complete Poems*, p. 279.

<sup>84</sup> Both references are from poems by Yeats: 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' and 'Among School Children'.

<sup>85</sup> Kavanagh, 'Autobiography', *November Haggard*, p. 1.

of such simplicity on his state of mind during recollections of happiness in early life after receiving news that his first poems have been published, reflecting:

I have only felt excitement three times in regard to my work. The first of these was [. . .] a letter from the *Weekly Independent* which when I opened it read: The Editor was accepting three poems of mine — Summer, Pessimist, and Freedom. The second was when I got a letter from AE (George Russell) saying that he liked the poems I sent him [. . .] The third was when I received a small blue envelope from *The Spectator* [July, 15, 1938] saying that the then Literary Editor was keeping three poems for publication.<sup>86</sup>

Recording little incidents in life are essential for understanding Kavanagh's artistic vision. In an interview with W. R. Rodgers in 1946, the poet recalls the kindness of AE as 'the first man who published and paid for a poem of mine', adding that he was 'a holier man' than Yeats because of his sensitivity and willingness to accept the personal experiences and lyrical poems which define Kavanagh's world.<sup>87</sup> The first poems which appeared in *The Irish Statesmen* were: 'The Intangible', 'Dreamer' and 'Ploughman' in 1930, all of which illustrate the influence of AE's romantic style or form, and the celebration of life and art, as can be seen from the following stanza:

I find a star-lovely art  
In a dark sod.  
Joy that is timeless! O heart  
That knows God!<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Kavanagh, 'Novel Writing', *November Haggard*, p. 11.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with W. R. Rodgers (1946), selected from *Patrick Kavanagh 1904-1967: A Life Chronicle*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 2000), p. 65.

<sup>88</sup> Kavanagh, 'Ploughman', *The Complete Poems*, p. 2.



We learn that it was AE who was responsible for inserting the adjective 'dark' before the noun 'sod' in this poem, which proves his involvement in the poetic process or outcome of the poetry. He exposed Kavanagh to a range of writers and influences from a long literary and philosophical tradition (including Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*), but in actual fact the 'real roots' of his learning were in 'the school books', as he recalls on one occasion in childhood whilst at Kednamisha National School in Inniskeen. He is struck suddenly by a young girl in the classroom reciting Mangan's 'A Vision of Connaught in the Thirteenth Century':

Listening to Mangan's poem I was rapt to that golden time in which poets are born. I felt as though I were in the presence of a magician, and I was; there was witchery in some of Mangan's poetry, it wasn't normal verse. Mangan's poem as read by that girl awoke in me for the first time those feelings that are beyond the reach of reason.<sup>89</sup>

It is interesting that Kavanagh shared Joyce's appreciation of Mangan as a great Irish poet, most likely due to the spiritual quality and effect of his writing or perhaps because he was a man who was willing to risk poverty in order to express the personal 'war' between self and society. Kavanagh's moment of epiphany seems to defy 'reason' and is perhaps the finest example of what the artistic self really meant to him, both in terms of its divine inspiration and its 'mystical' effects on the listener, where the instinctive, inner, immaterial nature cannot be reasoned away or analysed. Perhaps this is why he maintains that literary criticism is 'ultimately

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<sup>89</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 84.

unnecessary'.<sup>90</sup> He shares Wordsworth's feeling that 'We murder to dissect' poetry and it should be recognised for what it is: 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', rather than what the critics really want it to be.<sup>91</sup> Antoinette Quinn refers to the poet as being profoundly influenced by the Romantic tradition in her work *Patrick Kavanagh: Born-Again Romantic* (1991).<sup>92</sup>

The religious aspect of 'Ploughman' explores a similar contemplative or 'romantic' mind and defines the poet's art as 'like a prayer', reinforcing the spiritual nature of Kavanagh's artistic vision, a mysticism that AE shared and understood. 'God' appears at the centre of this existence and it is only through searching the 'heart' and soul of the artist and striking up a real relationship with the earth, being a part of one's environment and living naturally within it, that the poet can intimately connect himself to the sense of divinity within both nature and art. In order to express his true self, Kavanagh must search for the hidden and inner truth within and he can find this only through reaching a feeling of peaceful transcendence beyond the apparent tensions of his life, that existing quarrel between the personal self and community. What defines this conflict is the connection between the self and 'morality'.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Kavanagh, 'America- An Interview', *Lapped Furrows*, p. 96.

<sup>91</sup> The first quotation is from Wordsworth's poem 'The Tables Turned' and the second is selected from his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, cited in ed. Duncan Wu, *Romanticism*, p. 358.

<sup>92</sup> 'Throughout his life Kavanagh was to subscribe to the high Romantic creed that the poet is set apart from ordinary mortals, privileged or cursed by his gift', Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born-Again Romantic*, p. 20.

<sup>93</sup> Kavanagh outlines his views on 'morality' in the last edition of *Kavanagh's Weekly* (July 5, 1952), p. 3.

## **'The Moral Law': Socrates, Shakespeare and Kavanagh**

The history of Western literature is a record of the fatal flaws of characters driven to destruction as a result of their own actions, or by that of others. Beginning with ancient Greek tragedy, as recorded in the *Poetics* of Aristotle, we find individuals of 'a certain magnitude' suffering the fatal *hamartia* or *peripeteia*, where fate is decided by the Gods. Shakespeare allows for the conventions of Greek tragedy, borrowing the *anagnorisis* and putting in its place the soliloquies of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, where the individual chooses his own destiny, but in *King Lear*, perhaps his finest accomplishment, he juggles the challenges of modernity and the traditions of the past. Here 'The gods are just' and either they 'plague us' with 'our pleasant vices' or treat us as mere pawns for play, indifferent to our plight, so that we appear to them 'as flies to wanton boys'.<sup>94</sup>

Kavanagh's link to Shakespeare and to an ancient Socratic tradition has rarely been the subject of debate, although it is careless to overlook the Shakespearean influence on his writing (Falstaff alone might illustrate Kavanagh's feelings on 'the difficult art of not caring') or the more explicit allusions to ancient Greek history and mythology. Shakespeare's decision to place individual choice at the centre of his plays has already been discussed in Chapter 1 and how this has a bearing on the relationship to the self in works such as *Dubliners*. Modern scholars like Harold Bloom have gone even further, suggesting that Shakespeare was responsible for

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<sup>94</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, first quotation: Edgar, Act V, Scene III; second quotation: Gloucester, Act IV Scene 1, ed. W. J. Craig., *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Magpie Books, 1993), p.940 and p. 930.

inventing our modern understanding of selfhood and what it essentially means to be human today.<sup>95</sup>

Kavanagh is aware that individuals must take responsibility for their own actions and that there is some implicit 'Moral Law' that governs the poet, allowing him to borrow from the wisdom of the great masters before him. Consider the following quotations from some of Kavanagh's interviews and critical appreciations:

I think it's a mistake to blame anyone outside yourself [. . .] Some literary parties do not realise how much a part of what is called the Moral Law are the laws that govern literature [. . .] The only power that is worthwhile is knowledge, knowledge of oneself and of other people in relation to that self [. . .] The only thing under the sun is personality. If a statement is new it is not true. A man is original when he speaks the truth that has always been known to all good men.<sup>96</sup>

Any of the above statements could be elicited, at least thematically, in the philosophy of Socrates (Plato's *Apology* alone) or in the plays of Shakespeare (Bloom actually argues that 'Personality [. . .] is a Shakespearean invention').<sup>97</sup> The ancient Greek maxim 'gnothi seauton'— 'know thyself', is literally translated into the wisdom of Shakespeare's Polonius, in the epigram: 'to thine own self be true', and so Kavanagh's assessment of the self and 'morality' is not new.<sup>98</sup> It was normal for the artist or philosopher to be deemed suspicious and dangerous in the eyes of the

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<sup>95</sup> 'Later human beings are still being shaped by Shakespeare [. . .] He has become the first universal author [. . .] our ideas as to what makes the self authentically human owe more to Shakespeare than ought to be possible', Harold Bloom, *The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd, 1999), pp. 10-17.

<sup>96</sup> References in chronological order: Kavanagh, 'An Interview', *November Haggard*, p. 93, 'The Story of an Editor Corrupted by Love', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, Vol. 1, No. 3 and 'Signposts', *Collected Pruse*, p. 25.

<sup>97</sup> Bloom, *The Invention of the Human*, p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> 'Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act I Scene III.

public — Socrates was executed by being forced to drink hemlock, and it should be remembered that Shakespeare, on his arrival in London, was viewed as ‘an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers’, according to the poet Robert Greene.<sup>99</sup> He was subjected to public scrutiny, as Kavanagh experienced centuries later in Dublin.

What is obvious to Kavanagh, as it is considered by both Socrates and Shakespeare, is that true wisdom is found in the recognition of one’s ignorance and humility (‘a life of no importance’), and in the interdependency of self and soul. Shakespeare dramatizes the age-old Socratic wisdom through the character Touchstone in *As You Like It*: ‘The fool doth think he is wise but the wise man knows himself to be a fool’, a theme reiterated in *Twelfth Night*, following debate about the ‘soul’ of Olivia’s brother.<sup>100</sup> The governing ‘Moral Law’ is that the transience of life is a fact and all that really matters is to find the universal truth, before it is too late, as Plato illustrates in the *Phaedo*. The solution for both Socrates and Shakespeare is in the life of contemplation: for the former it must be discovered in philosophy and in the study of being; for the latter it surfaces in the powerful soliloquies of plays like *Hamlet* (‘to be or not to be’) and *Measure for Measure* (‘Ay, but to die and go we know not where’) but there is always the reminder of the limitations of human nature, as

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<sup>99</sup> This early reference to Shakespeare appears in Greene’s *Groats-worth of Witte, bought with a million of Repentance* (1592). It is interesting that Greene complained about Shakespeare’s education in the same way that Kavanagh was patronised by many educated academics in his lifetime.

<sup>100</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act V Scene I. The character Malvolio expresses a similar philosophy in *Twelfth Night*, Act I Scene V: ‘I take these wise men, that crow so at these set kind of fools, no better than the fools’ zanies’.

Michael Cassio cries out: 'I have lost the immortal part of myself'( *Othello*).<sup>101</sup>

Confusion is a *certainty* and so there must be an inner core of being concerned with the state of the individual soul.

Kavanagh refers to this 'Moral Law' as a critical viewpoint, a living and divine source: 'The knowledge of right and wrong [which] is the basis of criticism. The love in which poeticality lives comes from this knowledge'.<sup>102</sup> The poet also describes 'a clearly defined conflict in the world of poetry today [involving] certain newspapers hysterically on the side of confusion'.<sup>103</sup> He advocates that his own judgement 'acts in response to this confusing position',<sup>104</sup> that the poet's job is to somehow pursue that conventional sense of 'morality' and clarity of vision in the midst of 'Despair', which he believes Yeats, too, possesses.<sup>105</sup> In 'Ego Dominus Tuus', for example, Yeats reflects on the 'entangled' nature of the modern mind that 'has lost the old nonchalance of the hand' and expresses the need 'to find myself and not an image', where the eternal link between all artists is expressed, like Kavanagh, in a looking back to what has gone before: 'A Style is found by sedentary toil/And by the imitation of great masters'.<sup>106</sup> In their efforts to define an understanding of self and soul and the role of the poet within society, both artists appear to share links to the

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<sup>101</sup> The famous soliloquy is dramatized in Act III Scene I of *Hamlet*, Claudio's speech appears in Act III Scene I of *Measure for Measure* and Michael Cassio's appeal to Iago takes place in Act II Scene III of *Othello*.

<sup>102</sup> Kavanagh, 'An Interview', *November Haggard*, p. 93.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 'The Story of an Editor who was Corrupted by Love', Vol. 1 No. 13. , Saturday July 5, 1952, p. 2.

<sup>106</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Ego Dominus Tuus', *The Major Works*, pp. 73- 74.

Platonic tradition, and the irony is that Yeats could just as easily be defining Kavanagh in his poem:

Hic: Yet surely there are men who have made their art  
Out of no tragic war, lovers of life,  
Impulsive men that look for happiness  
And sing when they have found it.<sup>107</sup>

Yeats, like Plato, relies upon various dialogues in order to understand the nature of self and soul and he is constantly debating the philosophical traditions before him, as he effectively demonstrates in poems such as 'Among School Children'. In Kavanagh's case, 'happiness' again emerges in later life by the banks of the Grand Canal, 'singing' about his poetic 'hegira', in which he sees 'the beauty of water and green grass and the magic of light'<sup>108</sup> and rejoices in the spirit of art and living once more: 'O commemorate me where there is water/ Canal water preferably, so stilly/ Greeny in the heart of summer'.<sup>109</sup>

Plato's notions on the immortality of the soul (the soul as immaterial) certainly appeals to Kavanagh in his own critical judgements: 'the real roots' of nature can be found 'in our capacity for love and its abandon. The material itself has no special value; it is what our imagination and our love does to it' which is most relevant.<sup>110</sup> The 'only true teaching' he tells us, lies 'in watching/Things moving' so that 'To look on is enough/In the business of love', rather than becoming obsessed

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>108</sup> Kavanagh, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', *Collected Pruse*, p. 223.

<sup>109</sup> Kavanagh, 'Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin, 'Erected to the Memory of Mrs. Dermot O'Brien'' (1958), *The Complete Poems*, p. 295.

<sup>110</sup> Kavanagh, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', *Collected Pruse*, p. 223.

about basic needs or 'material' things.<sup>111</sup> In *Phaedo*, Plato's Socrates initiates for the first time in Western literature this particular preoccupation:

What of the other pleasures concerned with the service of the body?  
Do you think such a man prizes them greatly, the acquisition of distinguished clothes and shoes and other bodily ornaments?  
Do you think he values these or despises them, except in so far as one cannot do without them?  
I think the true philosopher despises them.  
Do you think, he said, that in general such a man's concern is not with the body but that, as far as he can, he turns away from the body and towards the soul? <sup>112</sup>

The character *Phaedo's* recollections of the last hours of Socrates provide an intimate portrayal of a man who does not fear death – a future that anticipates happiness for 'the good [rather] than the wicked'.<sup>113</sup> Socrates is presented as 'a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy', who uses 'pure thought' to free himself from 'the whole body because the body confuses the soul and does not allow it to acquire truth and wisdom'.<sup>114</sup> One of the interesting characteristics of Patrick Kavanagh is that he also expressed little fear about speaking his mind and of relying on philosophical contemplation. Peter Kavanagh, hinting at the Shakespearean influence on his brother's mind and art, records that he did not have much apprehension about death either:

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<sup>111</sup> Kavanagh, 'Is', *The Complete Poems*, p. 287.

<sup>112</sup> Selected from Plato's *Phaedo*, ed. John M. Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 56.

<sup>113</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, p. 55.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-57.



I will say only that I recalled Patrick reciting those magnificent lines he considered the greatest in English literature [from *Hamlet*]:

*O God, Horatio, what a wounded name  
(Things standing thus unknown) shall live behind me!  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story.*

Patrick had no fear of death. When cancer of the lung struck in 1955 and death seemed certain and immediate, his only real worry like that of Keats before him, was that he would die before he had made his best contribution to literature.<sup>115</sup>

Kavanagh's struggle with death began at an early age and he was close to dying on more than one occasion in his life.<sup>116</sup> In Peter's words, we learn that his 'story' was similar to that of Keats, one in which he outlined the suffering of the self within his own community, where he was chiefly concerned with his spiritual and intellectual well-being as a kind of 'philosopher of the arts'.

### **Kavanagh: moral spokesman of the 'forgotten faith'**

In 'Auden and the Creative Mind', Kavanagh confirms his belief in a tradition of writers: 'Shakespeare, Homer, Cervantes, Dickens, Swift, Joyce [and Auden]', all of whom are 'incapable of boring others' and 'who burn in the smithy of their souls the

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<sup>115</sup> Peter Kavanagh, *Lapped Furrows*, p. 52.

<sup>116</sup> In 1923, long before his battle with lung cancer, Kavanagh was admitted to a Fever hospital because he had contracted typhoid. He outlines this struggle with death in *The Green Fool*, p. 150.

raw material of life', fuelled by a sense of 'religious passion and purpose'.<sup>117</sup> He informs us that this creative fire which is 'intoxicating' because it puts us in 'a constant state of excitement', can sometimes paradoxically present a writer as 'immoral' or 'amoral', whilst the 'moral' authority of his literature is rarely in question.<sup>118</sup> He records a greater faith manifested in the writings of Herman Melville, G.K. Chesterton and Joyce, all of whom were a powerful influence on his belief in a divinity within the arts. Kavanagh may not always express this undeniable self-belief in his own life or the assured personality of philosophers such as Socrates or novelists like Joyce, at times appearing indecisive like Prufrock or Hamlet, but he is keen to record that as a young man he was often 'bursting with belief' in himself.<sup>119</sup>

Kavanagh may have Plato's notions about the soul in mind when he explains that as human beings we all 'live in a sort of fog [. . .] Society is a guide to the blind. We are all blind and all poetic activity takes place in this fog. Consciousness is despair'.<sup>120</sup> Plato informs us that in conversation with one of his students, Simmias, Socrates explains the desire to recover knowledge that has been lost since birth (leading to a kind of metaphorical blindness in society) and he identifies this recovery as the process of 'learning' itself.<sup>121</sup> Great art takes us to a hidden realm or higher authority beyond our comprehension and effectively puts us in touch with the 'invisible' spirit or soul that is permanent within us, which is why when we are

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<sup>117</sup> Kavanagh, 'Auden and the Creative Mind', *Collected Prose*, pp. 247-250.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247-251.

<sup>119</sup> Kavanagh, 'Autobiographical Prose', *Almost Everything*, Oct 16<sup>th</sup> 1963.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, p. 66.

‘conscious’ we may not be fully in contact with our true selves. Kavanagh admits that during his life he was driven out of this ‘messianic impulse’, acting against his ‘natural feelings’ by leaving the place of his birth to work in urban Dublin (‘the worst mistake of my life’), which is why he longs to return to this earlier state of ‘simplicity’ and ‘real sincerity’.<sup>122</sup> Where Socrates was happy to die a martyr for intellectual freedom and philosophical truth in ancient Athens, with a healthy gathering of young intellectuals following in his wake, Kavanagh grew to dislike city life because it ended in isolation, loneliness, financial insecurity and a never-ending quarrel with fellow poets and ‘mediocre personalities’, most of whom would never appreciate his wisdom, which he felt derived from that ancient ‘eternal source’.

The literal death of Socrates is translated into the life of Kavanagh as a kind of metaphorical death in Irish public life. The personal war is waged against the ‘materialism’ and ‘immorality’ of the age and the refusal to accept the poet’s ‘moral position’, which finally convinces him, like Socrates, that ‘only the contemplative’ state really matters in the end.<sup>123</sup> His satirical poetry and journalism have often been criticised as the lowest points in his literary career, but at least one poet and scholar has recognised in them an ‘accurate picture’ about ‘a side of Irish life which has universal extension’.<sup>124</sup> The philosopher within him later realises that ‘Satire is unfruitful prayer’, not because he feels unjustified in criticising the ‘immorality’ of

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<sup>122</sup> Kavanagh, ‘Self Portrait’, *Collected Prose*, p. 14; *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, ‘The Story of an Editor who was Corrupted by Love’, Vol. 1 No. 13., Saturday July 5, 1952, p. 2.

<sup>123</sup> Kavanagh, ‘From Monaghan to the Grand Canal’, p. 224.

<sup>124</sup> Anthony Cronin, ‘Patrick Kavanagh: Alive and Well in Dublin’, *Heritage Now: Irish Literature in the English Language* (Kerry: Brandon Book Publishers Ltd, 1982), p. 192.

personalities in his world, but because he finally understands that a truly philosophical mind must find that sense of balance and transcendence beyond the anxieties of existence.<sup>125</sup> He reinforces this message in a late poem entitled 'Living in the Country':

That my intention is not satire but humaneness  
An eagerness to understand more about sad man  
Frightened man, the workers of the world  
Without being savaged in the process.  
Broadness is my aim, a broad road where the many  
Can see life easier—generally.<sup>126</sup>

Kavanagh is interested both in the 'ordinary man' and in the philosophical position of understanding and illustrating the moral life of people ('humaneness'), something that incorporates both the individual and 'broad' society, in a way that we can all 'see life easier'. The quarrel between self and community is a necessity long before this sense of balance and peace become apparent. Kavanagh deliberately asserts his position because he believes that the poet 'creates an oral tradition. He does something to people. I am not sure that that something is good, for it is a disruptive, anarchic mentality which he awakens — and if we pursue him far enough we will be inclined to agree with Plato that the poet is a menace'.<sup>127</sup> Here we find him questioning the notion of what is considered 'good', one of the most significant aspects of Platonic thought. He is insistent that his views are not those of 'an angry

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<sup>125</sup> Kavanagh, 'Prelude' (1955), *The Complete Poems*, p. 275.

<sup>126</sup> Kavanagh, 'Living in the Country' (1959), *The Complete Poems*, p. 304.

<sup>127</sup> Kavanagh, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', p. 231.

man' but that he possesses a 'point of view held passionately [. . .] that the hero is he who is immovably centred. That immovability is the basis of true revolt. The usually corrupt person rages against this absolutism'.<sup>128</sup>

In Plato's *Apology* we find similar arguments expressed through the person of Socrates. He is brought to trial on a charge of impiety and corruption of the young, but his chief argument is that he has simply spoken 'the truth' about his society and world and that his accusers are angry with him for expressing a kind of moral 'absolutism'.<sup>129</sup> He is "immovably centred" (like Kavanagh who spent time fighting litigation or initiating 'libel' proceedings), and refuses to deny his belief in a kind of divine wisdom or 'spiritual sign' (*daemon*) that he possesses within him (what Kavanagh might call the poet's 'Parnassian' power).<sup>130</sup> He outlines his own belief that true knowledge of self comes from the humility of recognising one's ignorance. Through skilful questioning and deductive logic, Socrates argues in the course of the trial that his accusers are 'lying' and have brought charges against him simply because he has exposed their ignorance and corruption, or in the case of one of his chief accusers, Meletus, the hypocrisy that it is he who does not believe in the

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<sup>128</sup> Kavanagh, 'An Interview', *November Haggard*, p. 93.

<sup>129</sup> Kavanagh, like Socrates, was accused of 'obscenity' (a form of impiety), for example after publication of *The Green Fool* (1938), initially banned by the Irish Censorship Board in 1939 because it was considered 'obscene'. He was later visited and reprimanded by the Dublin Vice Squad in 1942, following the early publication of sections of *The Great Hunger* (then known as *The Old Peasant*) in *Horizon* magazine.

<sup>130</sup> Even after the guilty verdict is deliberated, Socrates explains: 'my divine sign has not opposed me, either when I left home at dawn, or when I came into court, or at any time', Plato, *Apology*, ed. John M. Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, p. 53.

Gods.<sup>131</sup> Kavanagh also accuses his contemporaries, mainly the established literati and authorities in Dublin, of a lack of belief in the divinity, of deliberately falsifying his image as a poet and writer, and of later denying the 'truth of his personality' and moral authority, during the famous libel trial of 1954.<sup>132</sup>

There are two significant aspects of Plato's *Apology* which are particularly relevant to Kavanagh's position on the nature of the self and the poet's quarrel with community. The first relates to the exposure of corrupt officials, who appear to think they know more than they do, and the second concerns the belief in divine wisdom which connects the poet with the Gods, both of which Socrates explains at the beginning of his defence:

I must tell you the truth — I experienced something like this: in my investigation in the service of the god I found that those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable [. . .] After the politicians I went to the poets, the writers of tragedies and dithyrambs and the others [. . .] I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers or prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say [. . .] because they thought themselves very wise men in other respects, which they were not.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Plato, *Apology*, p. 25.

<sup>132</sup> 'Truth is personality, and no genuine writer as a critic was anything but absolute in his destructiveness', Kavanagh, 'Critics, Actors and Poets', *Collected Prose*, p. 241. In the well-known libel trial, Kavanagh refers to how much of his writing is misunderstood. He replies to cross-examination by J. A. Costello about Pilate's response 'What is Truth?', and asserts that 'every man who has in him something of a Christ will reply, "I am truth"' and earlier: 'there is a world of goodness and merit which had denied them [other journalists], its existence [. . .] There must be someone, some other authority who delivers the final judgement', cited in 'The Trial', *Collected Prose*, p. 188-195.

<sup>133</sup> Plato, *Apology*, pp. 21-22.

Now we begin to understand Kavanagh's notion of 'technique' as a 'spiritual state of mind' and of the poet's belief in a prophetic, 'moral' authority, and what he means when he refers to the poet as artistic 'theologian'. Although Socrates and Kavanagh are separated by more than two thousand years of history, in the first edition of *Kavanagh's Weekly* entitled 'Victory of Mediocrity' (April 12, 1952) we find similar complaints to those of Socrates about the status quo, when the author maintains that 'All the mouthpieces of public opinion are controlled by men whose only qualification is their inability to think', and for Kavanagh this includes 'phoney' poets and writers who air their prejudices through 'insincerity' or overlook his own special entitlement as a 'moral' spokesman.<sup>134</sup> He often mentions his concern with expressing 'the truth' (one of his articles is actually entitled 'What is Truth?') and blames the leaders of his country for a 'false materialism' endemic in society, which is killing the 'transcendent imagination' of the poet and his people, forcing 'thousands' to emigrate to England and other countries 'where conditions are extremely bad'.<sup>135</sup> He claims that the multitude have been 'Doped' into a false sense of security by 'an avalanche of crossword puzzles and fashion competitions' to keep them occupied, but never quite finding the 'dignity and courage' to challenge their politicians, due to a lack of 'enthusiasm for life'.<sup>136</sup> Socrates likewise describes men living 'in a kind of prison' where they are told by their elders 'that one must not free

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<sup>134</sup> Kavanagh, 'Victory of Mediocrity', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, Vol. No. 1, Saturday, April 12, 1952. Kavanagh's attack on phoniness and insincerity in the arts appears in his final edition on April 12, 1952.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

oneself or run away'.<sup>137</sup>

Kavanagh argues that 'The basis of [the corrupt] point of view 'is a fundamental lack of belief in God. In a somewhat subtle way it is materialism'<sup>138</sup> (what Socrates defines as Meletus' chief crime and the denial of the divine spirit within),<sup>139</sup> and in the closing edition of the *Weekly*, we learn that he 'does not expect the masses of the people to be philosophers but one expects to find a minority who think, whose influence is felt throughout all society'.<sup>140</sup> What his journal appears to highlight, therefore, is not only the writer's concern with the personal self and the relationship to his community, but with the spiritual state of the nation, so that in following a long line of artists and thinkers before him, he joins a tradition of what AE called 'the craftsmen of the national soul'.<sup>141</sup>

Kavanagh's quarrel with politicians and with other poets and writers in Dublin has something to do with the denial of 'the God of life' and the spiritual condition of the individual person and his community.<sup>142</sup> He follows Plato's arguments in *Phaedo* and *Ion* of belief both in the divinity of the soul and within the arts, and the origins of this vision are present in his first major work of autobiography, *The Green Fool*, which charts his life from early childhood to his emergence as a young poet. Here he celebrates how 'the gods of poetry are generous:

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<sup>137</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, p. 54.

<sup>138</sup> Kavanagh, 'Victory of Mediocrity', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, p. 1.

<sup>139</sup> Plato, *Apology*, p. 25.

<sup>140</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Story of an Editor who was Corrupted by Love', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, Vol. 1 No. 13. , Saturday July 5, 1952, p. 2.

<sup>141</sup> Cited in John Zneimer, *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 17.

<sup>142</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Story of an Editor who was Corrupted by Love', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, p. 2.



they give every young poet a year's salary which he hasn't worked for; they let him take a peep into every tabernacle; they give him transcendent power'.<sup>143</sup> It is this kind of 'magic' which elevates him beyond the ordinary and so he is not far off Plato's views in the *Republic*, advocating for a form of leadership where the philosopher-poet is recognised as central to the governing of the state, as moral spokesman for society.

### **The self and the 'Glory of God': from Inniskeen to *The Green Fool* (1938)**

Kavanagh's early life appears as a struggle to make sense of his own artistic nature within the framework of his parochial community, as we learn in 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening', when he ambivalently reflects: 'A road, a mile of Kingdom, I am king/ Of banks and stones and every blooming thing'.<sup>144</sup> It is the feeling that as a poet he is designated a special place in his society that sets him apart from his people. In his local community he battles personally with the intellectual consequences of a life tied to the land and the 'poverty' of his surroundings, explored in poems such as 'Plough' and 'The Sower', where he views his own 'heroic' status as he longs to escape from the earth which he has grown to love ('O plough, /Though I break your hold your charms possess me still'), only 'to rise amongst starry fields on winged

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<sup>143</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>144</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening', *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2005), ed. Antoinette Quinn, p. 15.

dust'.<sup>145</sup> In 'Shancoduff' we discover his attachment to place and locality where 'the black hills' looking 'towards Armagh' metaphorically become his 'Alps'.<sup>146</sup> He feels insulted by the materialism of 'the cattle-drovers' who cannot see the spiritual permanence of the land and its 'transcendent' qualities, something he recognises since childhood as 'the transfigured face / Of a beauty that the world did not touch'.<sup>147</sup> He fails to escape from his ancestral ties because he sees himself as 'the representative of those/Clay-faced sucklers of spade-handles'.<sup>148</sup> These sentiments are vividly recaptured in *The Green Fool*, where he first begins to question his literary influences and conflict with others, mainly in relation to the local people in Inniskeen and how they are viewed from the outside. We find evidence of this throughout the text, in remarks such as 'The people didn't want a poet, but a fool, yes they could be doing with one of these. And as I grew up not exactly 'like another' I was installed the fool [. . .] Many of my neighbours treated me with cruelty and derision, but against that I have had- not friends- lovers'.<sup>149</sup> The feeling is of a man who senses within his own community the 'love' and cruelty' associated with human nature, where 'little fields and scraping poverty do not lead to grand flaring passions [but] plenty of fire and an amount of vicious neighbourly hatred to keep us awake'.<sup>150</sup> If he lives 'in important places', the Gods of poetry certainly

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<sup>145</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Sower'(1935) and 'Plough' (1938), selected from *The Complete Poems* (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1972), ed. Peter Kavanagh, pp. 18-61.

<sup>146</sup> Kavanagh, 'Shancoduff'(1937), *The Complete Poems*, p. 13.

<sup>147</sup> Kavanagh, 'A Christmas Childhood'(1940), *The Complete Poems*, p. 144.

<sup>148</sup> Kavanagh, 'Peasant'(1936), *The Complete Poems*, p. 30.

<sup>149</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 10.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

‘make their own importance’ because he wants ‘the best of both worlds,’ loving the fields and the natural beauty of his environment, whilst also questioning the philistine nature of the society around him:<sup>151</sup>

In those days I would not dream of mentioning anything rare and innocent in the market-place. I understood that there are things not to be mentioned under penalty of loss. Many years afterwards, when I was older and farther from angelhood, I told of that beatific wonder to clods and disillusioned lovers. I asked them if they didn’t see something beyond the hills of Glassdrummond. They laughed and said I was mad.<sup>152</sup>

Kavanagh was not proud of the account of home-life he presented in *The Green Fool*, later referring to it as a ‘stage-Irish’ lie because he believed it played up to the stereotypical or revivalist view of the Irish peasantry.<sup>153</sup> It is a significant moment in his career, however, not least because of the controversy it aroused in literary circles, but also because it is written in the first person as the voice of the younger Kavanagh charting the inevitable conflicts which arise within him.

The particular reference to ‘beatific wonder’ is an example of the writer’s deep feelings about his community. It involves direct communication between God and the individual person, clearly influenced by the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* and St Augustine on the nature of the soul. Christian theology is often undermined in Kavanagh criticism by arguments in favour of a kind of neo-romanticism, the pantheistic or pagan sentimentality about a happier Christian life

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<sup>151</sup> Kavanagh, ‘Epic’(1951), *The Complete Poems*, p. 238; Peter Kavanagh, *Sacred Keeper: a biography of Patrick Kavanagh* (The Curragh: The Goldsmith Press, 1979), p. 60.

<sup>152</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 123.

<sup>153</sup> Kavanagh, ‘Self Portrait’, *Collected Pruse*, p. 13.

in ancient Ireland, and yet the particular Catholic belief in the divinity ('beatific wonder') is found in most of his major writings. In *The Green Fool*, the poet makes it clear that he is fundamentally aware that any response to the question about whether people see 'something beyond the hills of Glassdrummond' will be met with cynical dismissal and denial of any religious or mystical insights. The presence of God, either within or 'beyond' the world is something that is inherent within the poet, whilst it becomes a joke to his fellow countrymen, merely synonymous with a kind of superstitious madness. It makes perfect sense that at an early age Kavanagh would make efforts to conceal his visionary tendencies to avoid appearing as 'the green fool' within his community. Aquinas' philosophy of 'beatific vision' in the *Summa*, drawing on the theology of St Augustine, challenges this rational scepticism, outlining the search for perfect happiness not through strictly material or bodily means, clouded by man's selfishness or egotism (as Plato first illustrated), but instead in man's spiritual contact with God, which Aquinas outlines in Article 8:

Augustine says (De Civ. Dei xix, 26): "As the soul is the life of the body, so God is man's life of happiness: of Whom it is written: 'Happy is that people whose God is the Lord' (Psalm 143:15)" [. . .] It is impossible for any created good to constitute man's happiness. For happiness is the perfect good, [. . .] to be found, not in any creature, but in God alone; because every creature has goodness by participation. Wherefore God alone can satisfy the will of man, according to the words of Psalm 102:5: "Who satisfieth thy desire with good things." Therefore God alone constitutes man's happiness.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, 'Article 8: Whether any Created Good Constitutes Man's Happiness', *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* Second and Revised Edition, 1920 literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Online Edition Copyright © 2008 by Kevin Knight *Summa Theologica*.

‘Happiness’ and the ‘universal good’ are particular to Kavanagh, and in fact he makes direct reference to Aquinas in several written sources.<sup>155</sup> He writes to his sister (Christmas 1933) about how the ‘Self’ becomes ‘suppressed’ in the life of a nun, and then turns to the theologian: “‘in love the whole spiritual life of man consists,” St. Thomas Aquinas says’.<sup>156</sup> He inherits such knowledge from his Catholic upbringing and education, the kind of schoolbook literature of the poet Mangan and most particularly in a deeply theological understanding of an ‘eternal’ source relating to the self or complete ‘personality’. Aquinas makes direct reference to this in *Summa Contra Gentiles* when he argues that ‘God is absolutely immutable. He is eternal, lacking all beginning or end’ and in *Summa Theologica*: ‘Eternity truly and properly so called is in God alone’.<sup>157</sup>

Kavanagh refers to a relationship between the ‘eternity’ of God and the arts and it is likely to be his reading of the poet and philosopher G. K. Chesterton which helps to bridge this gap between man as artist and God as eternity. This influence is explained in letters to his brother Peter in August 1947, where he defines how poetry ‘shows us crystalline facets of the one Eternal Truth’ and that ‘the thing is useless

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<sup>155</sup> In the first edition of *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, April 12, 1952, ‘Literature’, Kavanagh writes: ‘Even Saint Thomas Aquinas, after all his reasoning, returned to the imaginative unreason’. During the libel trial of 1954 he also speaks about the influence of Aquinas: ‘When I said I was truth I want to explain that to you. St Thomas Aquinas speaks not of reason, but of the Divine Intelligence—the flash—and that is the flash I am talking about—the truth. He says you don’t arrive at it through true reasoning’, ‘The Trial’, *Collected Prose*, p. 195.

<sup>156</sup> Patrick’s letter to his sister Celia at ‘Inniskeen, Christmas, 1933’, selected from *Lapped Furrows*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>157</sup> Trans. Anton C. Pegis, F.R.S.C., Saint Thomas Aquinas, ‘Chapter 15’, ‘Book One: God’, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (London and Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975), p.98 and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, ‘Question X’ ‘Third Article’, ‘The Eternity of God’, *The Summa Theologica: Second and Revised Edition* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd, 1920), p. 101.

unless it is caught up and shown as something eternal'. How do we know he is referring to God and not to some other kind of 'eternity' — 'the eternity of clay' (with its own religious connotations) in *The Great Hunger*? We know this because Kavanagh is defining poetry in order to assist Peter in his lectures in the United States and quoting directly from the words of G.K. Chesterton (in a letter which appears in the same month): 'The arts exist to show forth the Glory of God'. He begins the letter outlining these thoughts:

The influences which have shaped Poetic activity! That's a big story. Poetry, or rather, verse has taken local color (it only takes local color; the first reason, to glorify God in His Creation, remains) from every intense political movement as well as religious movement. The things one finds clearest in later verse is the absence of or weakening of Faith in God or in the Hereafter [ . . . ] As Chesterton remarked about something else 'They did not love the city enough to set fire to it'.<sup>158</sup>

Critics have overlooked the 'Chestertonian' link and it is something that requires more consideration, given the Englishman's devout Catholicism and his praise of the Irish for their 'practical' success. The famous allusion to Christianity as a 'sundering sword' is found in an essay called 'The Romance of Orthodoxy', in which Chesterton argues that the Catholic Church believes that 'man and God both [have] a sort of spiritual freedom' and this is where Kavanagh found his well-known Parnassian allusion:

Christianity is a sword which separates and sets us free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the

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<sup>158</sup> Kavanagh's letters to his brother were written in August 1947 and all quotations, including Chesterton's, can be found in *Lapped Furrows*, pp. 111-115.

universe into living souls. But according to orthodox Christianity this separation between God and man is sacred, because this is eternal. That a man may love God it is necessary that there is not only a God to be loved, but a man to love him. All those vague theosophical minds for whom the universe is an immense melting-pot are exactly the minds which shrink instinctively from the earthquake saying in our Gospels, which declare that the Son of God came not with peace but with a sundering sword.<sup>159</sup>

The 'eternal' is once more mentioned as a preoccupation. It is interesting that Chesterton is very much concerned in his article with man's soul or his spiritual connection with God, as he argues the case for Christianity's concern not so much with damnation but with salvation: 'not that he [Man] will lose his soul, but that he must take care that he didn't', where 'the true philosophy is concerned with the instant', the spiritual journey of the individual.<sup>160</sup>

Is there a similarity in how Kavanagh concentrates on the common and the banal aspects of his life? What is certainly of interest is Chesterton's illustration of God's transcendence and the fact that he is distinct from man, when he concentrates on the differences between Christianity and Eastern Buddhism. In the case of the latter, pantheism prevails and the individual 'cannot wonder, for he cannot praise God or praise anything as really distinct from himself', where there is 'no real possibility of getting out of pantheism any special impulse to moral action'.<sup>161</sup> It is probable that Kavanagh read this article, as he mentions Chesterton's views on the

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<sup>159</sup> G. K. Chesterton, 'The Romance of Orthodoxy', first appeared in Chapter Eight of Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* (1908). This selection is cited from ed. P. J. Kavanagh, *The Essential G.K. Chesterton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 304.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

‘sundering sword’, and if he agrees with his philosophy it would therefore raise questions for those critics who overemphasise the pantheistic or pagan nature of Kavanagh’s art. We know that Kavanagh is concerned with the moral purpose of his writing, so as Chesterton maintains, there may be some conflict between the Catholic philosophy and the other.

Peter Kavanagh vouches for the fact that his brother remained a Catholic and did not abandon his religion. In December 1934, Patrick confirms this in a letter to his sister: ‘Without faith it is impossible to be a poet and the faith of a Catholic is a lovely living flame’.<sup>162</sup> These are certainly not temporary feelings or emotions, because some years later in *The Green Fool* he is describing the ‘transcendent power’ of the poet who comes up with ‘wonderful lines which he thinks are his own’, but are merely part of that miracle of the angelic within nature:

Though no mortal has danced for me the angels of the sun have [. . .]  
Often on summer evenings when all the young people were dancing  
at some crossroads I wandered in petulant loneliness among the  
innocent flower-land and tree-land [. . .] in these rare moments of  
sweetness and light I remained true to myself, and poetry and vision  
were mine.<sup>163</sup>

It is worth noting in the ‘original manuscript’ of this passage, present in the archives at University College Dublin, that Kavanagh has pencilled the word ‘marvellous’ in

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<sup>162</sup> Patrick’s original letter to Celia can be found in The Kavanagh Archive at UCD, KAV/A/15 (7a). Peter claims his brother ‘was a Catholic with emphasis on the mystical element’, *Sacred Keeper: a biography of Patrick Kavanagh* (The Curragh: The Goldsmith Press, 1979), p. 109.

<sup>163</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 200.



the column.<sup>164</sup> What, may we ask, is this ‘vision’ to which he refers? Remaining ‘true’ to himself is explained in the following scene when he admits that he has experienced ‘a vision [. . .] too delicately rare for carnal words’ and when he asks his brother if he sees ‘anything very beautiful and strange on those hills?’<sup>165</sup> Peter misunderstands the poet’s words and concludes that he is referring to ‘the general beauty of the landscape’, when he has something more mystical and religious in mind, the kind of ‘beatific’ experiences of St Paul on the Road to Damascus perhaps?

Kavanagh’s knowledge of the visionary ‘sign’ is taught to him through direct contact with his faith, an understanding of the Catechism, the various ceremonies of the Church and through a linear understanding of its history — the writings of influential scholars within the Catholic tradition (Augustine or Aquinas),<sup>166</sup> whose understanding of ‘self’ is directly linked to Plato, as Charles Taylor explains:

Augustine gives us a Platonic understanding of the universe as an external realization of a rational order. Things should be understood ultimately as like signs, for they are external expressions of God’s thoughts [. . .] The affirmations of Genesis I, “and God saw that it was good”, are linked to the Platonic doctrine of the Idea of the Good, only the place of that all-structuring Idea is now taken by God himself [. . .] For instance, in *de Trinitate*, XII.I, [Augustine] distinguishes between the inner and the outer man. The outer is the bodily, what we have in common with beasts [. . .] The inner is the soul [. . .] Let one famous line stand for many: “Noli foras ire, in teipsum, redi; in interior homine habitat veritas”

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<sup>164</sup> The original manuscript of *The Green Fool* can be found in The Kavanagh Archive, UCD, KAV A8 (A), p. 200.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>166</sup> See reference to Aquinas in ‘Literature’, *Kavanagh’s Weekly*, April 12, 1952, p. 7.

("Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells the truth"). Augustine is always calling us within.<sup>167</sup>

This Augustinian battle between the inner and outer man is implicit in *Tarry Flynn*, Kavanagh's most significant work of prose fiction, where we find an underlying conflict between religion (personal faith), money or conformity to material values (a pre-eminent feature of Aquinas' *Summa*), and the desire for self-expression and escape from the tensions of community. Una Agnew notes that any hint of the Church's preoccupation with Jansenism or 'Augustinian pessimism' is ruled out in Kavanagh's art, and this is true.<sup>168</sup> In early twentieth-century Ireland the Catholic Church's concern with the dangers of original sin and concupiscence (present in the writings of Augustine and Aquinas) is transformed in Tarry's vision into a more mystical and moral pursuit of 'love', 'beauty' and 'truth', but it is also important to recognise the connection which the theologians illustrated between God and the personal or spiritual self, which Kavanagh prioritises within his art.

We find this search for individual value and honesty throughout the Christian tradition, for example in the letters of St Paul (*Romans* 7-8, 12) and most notably in Augustine's *Confessions*, where admissions of personal sin and individual doubt are part of the subject's journey towards conversion to Christianity. Augustine represents what Kavanagh defines as the 'poet as theologian', illustrating perhaps for the first time in literary history the view of an authentic autobiographical self, a

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<sup>167</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>168</sup> Una Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, pp. 12-18.

thinker who illustrates man's direct relationship to God, whether through the individual person's soul or through 'divine illumination'.<sup>169</sup>

Kavanagh's 'Raglan Road' exemplifies this divine 'sign' present in the mind of the artist, when he describes the character of the speaker expressing his desire to pass on this hidden knowledge ('I gave her the secret sign'), but his subject is too much in a rush to listen, only desperate to escape the wild Kavanagh on the street ('I see her rushing hurriedly'). In the end he must accept his own mortality ('when the angel woos the clay he'll lose his wings at the dawn of day'), some form of conscious understanding that the individual or artist, although in touch with the divine, can never quite reach that sense of angelic perfection — that this is man's essential and spiritual dilemma — because when he accepts love, he must also accept his mortality, he must embrace the physical or material world, but in doing so he will lose his spiritual 'wings', regardless of the momentary flash of love when he is temporarily free from 'the clay' of living. In the act of engaging in the freedom of a normal life, the artist will lose the capacity for great art because he is too much absorbed in his worldly pleasures, so that in order to truly create he must willingly accept the life of inner conflict and his apartness from others, that necessary quarrel with surroundings ('my reason must allow/ that I had loved not as I should a creature made of clay . . .')

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<sup>169</sup> Augustine shares Socrates' belief in a spiritual or divine sign, describing how the individual must be illuminated by the light of God: 'For Thou lightest my lamp, O Lord; O my God, enlighten my darkness: and of Thy fullness we all have received. For Thou art the true Light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world: because in Thee there is neither change nor shadow of alteration', trans. F. J. Sheed, *The Confessions of St Augustine* (Sheed and Ward: London and New York, 1944), XV, Book Four, p. 59.

Aquinas illustrates in *Summa Gentiles* that this is where faith comes in. He argues that some people are too much absorbed in the ways of the world to accept the divinity, or the artist's sense of spiritual distance from the material, and because there is only so much that 'reason' can do for us, faith becomes entirely necessary, as the human brain cannot quite fathom or comprehend the angelic or divine state, since we are too much steeped in our own material lives. We must turn rather to the instinctive impulse, to the acceptance of the eternity of God and to our own mortality - 'the truth' of which St John illustrated was Christ's mission on Earth.<sup>170</sup> The trials and tribulations of love must therefore be accepted naturally, as Kavanagh recognised in some of Yeats' early poetry—that sense of understanding that the artist himself is ultimately doomed to failure if he thinks he can somehow conquer human passion by revealing his 'secret sign' in the everyday realities of human interaction.<sup>171</sup> This can only lead to a sense of failure or misunderstanding, since love, like art, cannot always be explained, except as a natural human instinct.

The self, for Kavanagh, becomes a real manifestation of a person's spiritual life and cannot be denied through speculation about existing internal contradictions, as advocated by later philosophers like Hume, or in proclamations about the death of God, and even perhaps in modern theories about an 'illusory sense of self' or the

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<sup>170</sup> "'For this I was born, and for this came I into this world, that I should give testimony to the truth" (John 18:37). Aquinas outlines these arguments in 'Book One: God', *Summa Contra Gentiles*, pp. 60-67.

<sup>171</sup> On 18<sup>th</sup> December 1934, Kavanagh wrote to his sister Celia outlining the influence of Yeats' poem 'The Folly of Being Comforted' on his own personal experiences of love, cited in *Lapped Furrows*, p. 31.

'Death of the Author'.<sup>172</sup> There appears to be a concrete belief in a unified self, where the soul of the individual (as directly connected to God as eternal source) becomes, in the Aristotelean sense, a person's particular being, which would have clear and significant effects on the writings of Joyce and O'Flaherty.<sup>173</sup> Where Joyce is influenced by Aristotle and Aquinas (Chapter V of *A Portrait of the Artist*), O'Flaherty seems to be more engaged with transcending the Christian God through Nietzsche, but there is common ground in acceptance of a tradition which celebrates the artistic soul at the centre of the work of literature.

Chapter 2 explored O'Flaherty's preoccupation with the inner life of the artist and it is likely that his Catholic upbringing and early religious life had a bearing on this. He was also concerned with expressing the 'truth' and the 'secret mind' of the writer and debated the religious battle between Christ and Nietzsche, where the author seemed to be in a constant state of restlessness, followed by doubt.<sup>174</sup> What has not always been recognised is that Nietzsche, despite his attack on orthodox Christianity, identified that in certain situations religion could give to the individual

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<sup>172</sup> 'The Death of the Author' is the title of Roland Barthes' influential essay (1967) and the 'illusory sense of self' is a phrase attributed to more recent thinkers such as Eckhart Tolle in *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 27.

<sup>173</sup> Aristotle's concept of selfhood emerged or developed from Plato's ideas of the soul, becoming the particular 'form' of the body, defined in Jerrold Siegel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 46. Aristotle's understanding of the soul was very close to our modern concept of selfhood today and he was a powerful influence on the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>174</sup> See O'Flaherty's letter to Garnett in May 1923, in which he writes: 'I can see that the only thing one can write with any merit is the truth'. In the same letter, he speaks about the 'argument' between 'Christ and Nietzsche' in which he believes the former would win, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, pp. 13-14.

person a healthy 'contemplative life' and 'a manifold peace of the heart'.<sup>175</sup>

The influence of Christian theology is certainly present in Kavanagh's writing, for example a quotation from St John's Gospel appears in the opening lines of *The Great Hunger*, and it may be that his literature attempts to reconcile the ancient Platonic notions of the spiritual life with the more modern Christian elements within his midst.<sup>176</sup> This would explain some of his reservations about the prevailing teachings of Catholicism in his life-time, which apparently deny the focus on the inner life of the individual artist, 'that ancient faith in the power of the poet'.<sup>177</sup>

In *The Green Fool* Kavanagh writes significantly about this development of his artistic and spiritual life, describing in one episode how a local farmer called Michael 'helped [. . .] to make [his] soul', by persuading him not to take farming life too seriously, so that he could naturally sense 'the world coming to life'.<sup>178</sup> In the same chapter he describes visiting 'a religious man' who 'quoted the scriptures like a theologian' (a quality he inherits for feelings about the role of the poet), and it is clear that Kavanagh celebrates the natural indifference of Michael towards his neighbour's particular methods of farming, revering the fact that 'there was some method in his careless methods' because he always seemed to have good luck with his crop. The natural qualities of Michael's life are always revered ('I had been soul-

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<sup>175</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Vintage, 1989), p. 73.

<sup>176</sup> The opening lines of *The Great Hunger*: 'Clay is the word and clay is the flesh' draws parallels with verses one and fourteen of St John's Gospel. The clash between Pagan and Christian elements is considered by Allison Muri in her article 'Paganism and Christianity in Kavanagh's 'The Great Hunger'', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Dec., 1990), pp. 66-78.

<sup>177</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 247.

<sup>178</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 90

apprenticed to a saint') and it this celebration of everyday existence which appears to be taking place in Kavanagh's mind in the writing of his autobiography. He is willing to sacrifice an orderly physical existence with a more structured and methodical inner life, so that the reality of the impoverished memory of 'Shancoduff' and the difficulties of farming life are forever imprinted in recollections of the landscape which surrounds the family home:

Around our house there stood little hills all tilled and tame. Yellow flame-blossoms of the whin lit bonfires all over the landscape [. . .] The sunny side [. . .] was good soil and boasted some tall thorn trees, but the black side facing the north was crabbed and poverty-stricken and grew only stunted blackthorns and sorrel plants [. . .] Slieve Gullion to the north fifteen miles distant, to the west the bewitched hills and forths of Donaghmoyne.<sup>179</sup>

Kavanagh is here mapping out what Heaney would call his cultural *omphalos*: 'marking the centre' of his world and childhood experiences.<sup>180</sup> This puts him directly in touch with the life of the 'common man'- the same 'ordinary people' he would later claim are unfit for the higher realm of poetry. There is a hint of irony in this, given the fact that early in *The Green Fool* he explains how 'The date of [his] birth is cut on the tablets of common existence'.<sup>181</sup> There are tensions in Kavanagh's mind between the 'aristocratic' view of the arts and the knowledge of his own humble beginnings, with the belief that poetry and literature are not quite appreciated by others within his community, who often view him as 'a lazy fool'

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<sup>179</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 8.

<sup>180</sup> Heaney, 'Mossbawn', *Preoccupations*, p. 17.

<sup>181</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 9

with his head in the 'stars'.<sup>182</sup> We find this hostility even in Kavanagh's depiction of his own father who complains about his 'day-dreaming way of living' which could easily see him 'ending his days in the workhouse',<sup>183</sup> but the father's strength of character and encouragement is presented throughout, even to the point that after his death his 'spirit' is seen to live on ('as I write these words I know he is beside me, encouraging me to go on and win to be a great writer').<sup>184</sup>

Kavanagh learns from his parents that hard work is a necessity, that 'the two most important subjects were the saying of the Rosary each evening and the making of money'.<sup>185</sup> The tensions between life and religion, the fear of poverty and the need to make a living, remain within him forever - to such an extent that he openly admits in later life that any man with an interest in poetry should not venture into it 'unless he has buckets of money'.<sup>186</sup> The material world always infringes on the inner spiritual man, leading to the personal quarrel within: 'Beauty, beauty was everywhere but it was money we were after. How many precious hours did I squander'.<sup>187</sup>

When considered in this light, *The Green Fool* becomes central to Kavanagh's development as an artist, an illustration of how he thinks in early life, as he begins to emerge as a young poet in conflict with his surroundings, harbouring ambivalent feelings about his world. It is here that he records his early memory of the young girl

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Kavanagh, 'Autobiography', *Lapped Furrows*, p. 2.

<sup>187</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 68.



reciting Mangan's poem and where he begins to explore in prose the innermost depths of his personality and artistic soul:

I was not a literary man. Poetry is not literature: poetry is the breath of young life and the cry of elemental beings: literature is a cold ghost-wind blowing through death's dark chapel.<sup>188</sup>

Poetry for Kavanagh becomes instinctive rather than the domain of the 'literary man'. It involves the exploration of the inner spiritual life of the individual. It is 'not literature' to be read and analysed away, simply because it is 'the breath of young life', the personality of the author and the expression of his artistic soul.

### ***Tarry Flynn*: reshaping the autobiographical self**

Kavanagh wrote *The Green Fool* during his visit to London in 1938, when he was 'nostalgic for the farm' and possessed all 'the romantic appearances' of the poet.<sup>189</sup> This writing predated some of his finest poems and prose works of the 1940s when he searched for a more 'objective reality' in works such as *Tarry Flynn*.<sup>190</sup> He considered this novel 'the only authentic account of life in Ireland as it was lived' in the early twentieth century, essentially because it explored the spiritual state of self and community, and the potential of the truly artistic personality to become

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<sup>188</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 203.

<sup>189</sup> Celia Kavanagh, 'Introduction', *Lapped Furrows*, p. 22.

<sup>190</sup> 'Perhaps now that I have turned to objective reality I may be able to write something honest and beautiful, as chestnut trees or horses out on grass', Kavanagh's letter to his sister Celia, Inniskeen (May 30<sup>th</sup> 1934), *Lapped Furrows*, p. 30.

ultimately comic in spirit. Kavanagh mustered all his creative energy and vision into this work of art. What has not been recognised in relation to Kavanagh's body of work is the fact that he constantly revised and reshaped his novels and many of his writings from the 1930s to the end of his life. By 1950, in his final autobiographical effort, *By Night Unstarred*, Peter Kavanagh reveals that he urged his brother to begin 'his true autobiography' and by this point his main intention was 'to find a form that would avoid the disastrous "I am"''.<sup>191</sup> It was his effort to project the hidden self or 'sign' into the work of literature, removing the ego and replacing it with the soul of the artist, without prejudicing the spiritual qualities necessary for the poet's authority. He found this most difficult because in his experience most attempts at such were 'stifled by their self-importance', so that in order to be successful he needed to be 'inconsequent', to search for 'the comic thing' or the 'ironic attitude',<sup>192</sup> as he explains:

For many years I have tried to find a technique by which a man might reveal himself without shame, that might for example allow me to tell of the women in my life and what was offered. There are two fairly successful examples of such techniques — in *Don Quixote* and in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Bloom is the side of Dedalus that never gets into the histories.<sup>193</sup>

Kavanagh's orchestrated search for humour and the comic element in his writing was an effort to find his true voice in the form of art, to resolve the conflict within

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<sup>191</sup> Peter Kavanagh, 'Introduction: Unloading the Heart', *By Night Unstarred: An Autobiographical Novel* (Newbridge: The Goldsmith Press, 1977), p. 7.

<sup>192</sup> Kavanagh, 'Autobiography', *November Haggard*, p. 1.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

him concerning the nature of the autobiographical self. The influence of Joyce, Cervantes, Herman Melville and G.K. Chesterton all become central to this process because their art, in Kavanagh's words, represents the spiritual 'technique' for which he was searching.

In various articles his admiration for Joyce and Melville is particularly strong: he refers to *Ulysses* as 'a very funny book' and his remarks on the shaping of Joyce's art are most striking, when he argues that 'God, through the agency of society, manages to breed a race of artists by the process of starvation [. . .] or must he have the [natural] kink in him originally? He has got to hate society [that is] certain'.<sup>194</sup> Kavanagh would have appreciated the debate between Stephen Dedalus and Mr Deasy about the process of history moving towards the 'manifestation of God' and Stephen's answer that God's presence could be more simplified in the idea of 'A shout in the street'.<sup>195</sup> Of Melville, he appreciated the exploration of 'Eternity' in *Moby Dick* (1851), and the emergence of the author's artistic soul through his descriptions of the sea, whereas in *Ulysses*, the 'great merit is that it enlarges the world for us; it brings us through the ivory gates of the imagination [. . .] When we are unconscious we are close to the Eternal. We have to shut our eyes to see our way to Heaven. *Moby Dick* is an evocation of the sea and of the unconsciousness to which I am referring. It was written out of the blind life'.<sup>196</sup> The awakening from this slumber becomes for the poet the struggle with his community and modern

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<sup>194</sup> Kavanagh, 'James Joyce', *Collected Pruse*, p. 261.

<sup>195</sup> Kiberd ed. Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 42.

<sup>196</sup> Kavanagh, 'Three Favourite Books', *Collected Pruse*, pp. 264-265.

civilisation, and so we are seeing within him a kind of Jungian battle ‘on two levels [between] two different worlds’, where the self becomes ‘an exciting inner adventure’ and the ‘regulating centre of his soul’.<sup>197</sup>

Kavanagh’s ‘novel writing’ becomes an experimental process to discover the spiritually artistic method, resulting in the author leaving behind six unpublished novels, all of which can be found in the archive at University College Dublin.<sup>198</sup> These revised works predate the official publication of *Tarry Flynn* and are in fact among the principal sources he used to complete the published novel in 1948. What is particularly striking in the autobiographical writings is how Kavanagh models his characters on real-life individuals, on situations or events familiar to the writer in his native Inniskeen, where the quarrel between self and community is always apparent. Peter Kavanagh explains why this was the case, suggesting that a version of *Tarry Flynn* written in 1946 contains ‘the two halls theme’ - by this he means an episode involving a real feud concerning ‘the nearby Kenny estate’, between local parishioners and the parish priest over the building of two parish halls. Patrick left out this version because he failed to find a publisher in the years between 1946 and 1948, amending the official published novel for a sum of £100 offered by The Pilot

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<sup>197</sup> Excerpt from ‘Man and his Symbols’ (audiobook) by Carl G. Jung, ‘Jung-The Self’, found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAPyRryK1HY> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> Nov 2014], where he explains that ‘trying to give the living reality of the Self a constant amount of daily attention is like trying to live simultaneously on two levels or in two different worlds. One gives one’s mind, as before to outer duties but at the same time one remains alert for [. . .] an exciting inner adventure’.

<sup>198</sup> Aoife Leonard’s introduction to the Kavanagh Archive at UCD states: ‘Only one of these novels was finished by Patrick’s brother Peter in 1977 and according to him it involved ‘a clerical-agrarian plot’ based on a real-life incident in 1937 when local parishioners intimidated the nearby Kenny estate [. . .] This behaviour he notes was from “pious” Catholics whose actions ‘broke all moral codes’ because the ‘quarrel for land was greater than their Christianity’.

Press. There may be more personal reasons: the realisation that 'an anticlerical novel' would not be well-received in the Ireland of the late 1940s.

The opening of the 1946 script begins with a lengthy description of the setting concerning such a feud over land: 'A sunny morning was filtering through the leaves of poplar, sycamore and whitethorn into dusty farmyards [. . .] bleaching white the straws that fringed dunghills, and sometimes coming in windows to dim fires on hearths'.<sup>199</sup> This can be easily contrasted to the published 1948 version, which places Tarry at the centre of the narrative, beginning with the words: 'Where the devil did I put me cap? Did any of you see me cap?' It is fitting that the author bases his novel on the feud over real estate or land- that same conflict between the material world of community and the individual spirit which preoccupied his soul in *The Green Fool*. It is a topic which returns in the published version of the novel on a more personal level, in the well-known scene involving the fight between Joe Finnegan and Tarry:

'If you come out here,' said Tarry softly, I may as well tell you, Finnegan that I'll cut the head off you. Do you hear that?'

Immediately the man had rushed through a gap and went for Tarry. As he rushed at him Tarry, who had studied a book on boxing, dropped the bill-hook and rammed out his left hand in Joe's direction, half hoping it would miss him [. . .] To Tarry's surprise the punch connected with the man's right eyebrow, cutting it open.<sup>200</sup>

The great irony of this episode is that the depiction of Tarry throughout the novel is far from the stereotype of a violent man. He is a farmer-poet who dreams of

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<sup>199</sup> This version of *Tarry Flynn*, refused publication in New York in 1946, can be found in The Kavanagh Archive at UCD, KAV B 14-16.

<sup>200</sup> Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 105.

escaping the tightly-knit community of Dargan (set in County Cavan), a man more interested in idealism and sex than he is in religion, in the sun shining over 'the little hills', admiring 'the headlands and the hedges [. . .] so fresh and wonderful' than he is on attending 'Mass'.<sup>201</sup> There is in his character an unquestionable pagan celebration of the world, a search for 'the God of life', where the protagonist feels he is 'not a Christian', finding 'In the god of Poetry [. . .] a God more important to him than Christ. His god had never accepted Christ', so that there is a sense of someone who admires the Catholic faith simply because it 'kept girls virtuous until such times as he'd meet them'.<sup>202</sup> This causes some problems when it comes to judging the 'Catholic perspective' from the point of view of the author.

There are significant features of the published version of *Tarry Flynn* which must be considered when assessing how the novel relates to Kavanagh's views on the relationship or tensions between self and community. Firstly, there is the spiritual element, which involves not only the author's views about the Church in Ireland (his own personal feelings on God and the soul), which creates a quarrel between the author and protagonist's Christian upbringing and the celebration of pagan elements within the novel. Secondly, there exists the fact that when we study the novel and Kavanagh's autobiographical and prose writings in more depth, it becomes clear that he is not satisfied with presenting himself, or the personal voice, directly in the work of art ('the self as illustration'), suggesting that Tarry's views

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

and actions are not always the same as the author's. All the characters may have links to personalities in or around Inniskeen: Father Daly, for example, is modelled on a real-life priest called Father Maguire and Eusebius Cassidy, who 'shared most of Tarry's views on everything' is described as 'a romantic idealist' and 'a poetic man', like the author himself.<sup>203</sup>

After 1938, Kavanagh distrusted the personal autobiographical self which is evident in *The Green Fool*, because it left him open to litigation and manipulation by outside parties, and so he searched for a safer and more detached viewpoint, one that effectively distanced him from the personal responsibility he so often accepted in life, and the evident tensions of his community — the threat of legal action which he experienced in the Gogarty trial. Tarry himself faces a similar threat of litigation following the fight with Joe Finnegan. The impersonal omniscient narrator is more appealing and secure for Kavanagh, as he learns from writers such as Joyce and Melville, allowing him to establish that critical distance from the novel, whilst exploring the inner spiritual life of his protagonist. Tarry's character can be seen as the embodiment of a personality who seeks to find an inner sincerity based on the beauty of the world around him, transcending the petty squabbles and materialism of his community, and resolving the tensions within him in relation to his own identity and the realities of his society. He is a vacillating personality, someone who is very human in his instincts and at times erratic in behaviour, but he is also honest

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<sup>203</sup> Peter Kavanagh suggests that the name Eusebius was influenced by a reading of church history, *Patrick Kavanagh 1904-1907: A Life Chronicle*, p. 172.

about his feelings concerning his faith and religion, observing his people, like Kavanagh himself, 'with a steady eye':

Tarry ignored their banter and when the Mass Book was being changed for the First Gospel he took the advantage of the commotion of the congregation rising to slip in unobserved, except by the young women who made it their business to watch every man as he came in. Tarry disliked staying at the door, not because he had any strong faith or piety, but because he found the atmosphere there annoying.<sup>204</sup>

If the ordinariness of Tarry's personality is presented, he is also shown to be apart from his community, there is 'a kink in him' like Kavanagh, 'something so natural about him, so real and so innocent and which yet looked like badness', likely to be that Platonic notion of the anarchic personality.<sup>205</sup> The crowds attending Mass seem to prove that 'both faith and piety' abides in the parish, 'with all the richness of human character that goes with a deep faith in the Hereafter'.<sup>206</sup> This could be a positive feature because 'God' is willing to overlook 'the shabby' interior of the building. On closer inspection, however, the scepticism is very much apparent: the congregation has arrived as if they are appearing at the 'big summer fair day in the neighbouring town'. The conflict between spiritual faith and the love of 'God' is weighed against the materialism of 'Mammon'.<sup>207</sup> The narrator skilfully shows this contrast by presenting the narrow piety of protagonist and people who 'all put on

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<sup>204</sup> Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, p. 14.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*



mouths of righteousness and narrowed eyes'.<sup>208</sup> They appear with faces 'the colour of clay', diametrically opposite to the intellect of the eloquent Father Daly with his 'silvery voice', castigating the individuals responsible for the attack on Mary Reilly at the crossroads (the unannounced Tarry Flynn and Eusebius Cassidy). But it is the indifference of Tarry and the religiosity of his people which is under attack in this scene (Father Daly outlines this in his declaration of 'Hypocrites, humbugs'), and it is interesting that the Priest is shown to be the most charismatic, although he is also presented as a figure of fun.

The narrative itself is concerned more with the efforts to find a reliable and coherent inner strength for the individual personality. For example, the ceremony is followed by a description of 'the happiest time' in Tarry's life where he can venture off into the fields and dream of 'the thrilling daisies in the sun-baked hoof-tracks [. . .] O the mystery of Eternity stretching back is the same as its mystery stretching forward'.<sup>209</sup> In early drafts of one unpublished novel, the writer experiments with names, using 'Tarry', 'Paddy', 'Felix' and 'Fayley Madden', and in one instance refers to how 'Young Paddy was the most troubled man in Gortial. He had dreamed of those fields, or of one field in particular, The Forth Hill', which is certainly a reference to 'the Big Forth' in 'Shancoduff', suggesting that the personal self is always at the forefront of his mind.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>210</sup> Unfinished/unpublished novel entitled 'Fayley Madden' by Patrick Kavanagh, The Patrick Kavanagh Archive, KAV/A/9, p. 102. Here Fayley Madden is described as 'a blacksmith' and a 'fiddler', p. 6. A 'poet' called 'Tarry Flynn' is also mentioned in the same manuscript, p. 32.

If *Tarry Flynn* is steeped in certain personal experiences of the author, it also goes beyond this reality into the more spiritual values which Kavanagh harboured throughout his life. In the opening pages of the novel, as he develops insight into Tarry's character and his relationship with his friend Eusebius Cassidy, we are told that the men 'are very lonely. Something had gone wrong with the machinery of living'; they are far from perfect personalities and to understand this we have a return to Kavanagh's preoccupation with the mechanical Paddy Maguire of *The Great Hunger*, an obsession with the spiritual life that appears to be ignored in the world he knows all too well. He cannot escape from the 'tragedy' of rural Ireland no matter how much he creates 'the comic spirit' in *Tarry Flynn*, because he is well aware that the political world is indifferent to the plight of these young men. His attack is, as he claims, somewhat 'anti-clerical', but this is an allusion with a hint of irony, which he makes during the 1940s, as he is preparing the early drafts of *Tarry Flynn*:

I am working on this novel, not for the present generation or for posterity but simply if I do not I will be lost. I did not know then the whiskey alternative or alleviative.

The novel belonged to my anticlerical period. I had been brought up on the Celtic myth and no great masterpiece existed outside it. Anticlericalism was part of the jag. I'm not saying I'm pro-clerical now, and I must point out that the anticlericalism of the Celtic school—literary and political—was very much admired by the clerics themselves. They expected it from you. If you didn't care you were dangerous.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Kavanagh, 'Novel Writing 1940-1944', *November Haggard*, p. 11.

Kavanagh's admission of 'I will be lost' suggests a personal fear of spiritual degeneration, the death of his artistic soul, rather than outright 'anticlericalism'. It is the fear that he will die before recreating his true self (the soul) in the work of art. The anticlerical stance is all part of the 'no caring jag', a deliberate, not an aggressive gesture, which certainly identifies reservations about the false piety of parishioners or the behaviour of certain clerics, evident in articles such as 'Sex and Christianity' (*Kavanagh's Weekly*, May 24 1952), but it is all part of the author's need to be in reaction against the limitations and restrictions placed on the self within society. Kavanagh is no fan of de Valera's Ireland, but he is also conscious that the clergy play a significant and powerful role in his community. This may explain his willingness to remain in contact with various clerics throughout his life, most notably Archbishop John McQuaid of Dublin, for whatever personal reasons.

The fact that Tarry Flynn is constantly quarrelling with his neighbours, that he remains distant from the clergy and cannot escape entirely into the contentment of the spiritual life, explains why he leaves Inniskeen at the end of the novel. He is not free from the emotional or religious ties of community and must exercise imaginative or creative distance in order to find his true self, as his Uncle Petey insightfully remarks:

The uncle laughed. 'Will the dunghill run away?' said he. The uncle did not realise how beautiful Tarry thought the dunghill and the muddy haggard and gaps and all that seemed common and mean. He told him how much he loved this district and the uncle said: 'Haven't you it in

your mind, the best place for it? If it's as beautiful as you  
imagine you can take it with you.<sup>212</sup>

The emphasis is on 'the mind', on distancing oneself from the material and finding a greater, more imaginative freedom. If Tarry represents the spiritual and instinctive passion within Kavanagh, Uncle Petey could surely be the more rational element, though this is not definitive because it is Tarry who is worrying about 'money' in the end and it is Petey who dismissively gestures: 'Isn't there money in the house?' Kavanagh was a man who was very much concerned about money but he was also willing to sacrifice the steady job and career (though he believed in it) in favour of the poetic life, which required the courage and authority of the poet to master, whilst enduring financial hardships in the process. It is interesting that *Tarry Flynn* begins with similar monetary concerns, the mentioning of the old Uncle's eccentricity and the complaints from the young man's mother about religious obligations to attend Mass, the recognisable battle between the spiritual self and the physical expectations and realities of community, the sense perhaps of the Augustinian inner and outer man.

The final scene in the novel is surely the most poignant, where the love between mother and son reaches a climax. The need to leave behind what he loves most is Tarry's innermost conflict, to overcome the emotional battle between the personal self and the difficulties or practicalities of his community:

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<sup>212</sup> Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn*, p. 186.

‘How will she carry on,’ he kept mumbling. ‘How will she carry on.’

He was sorry for his mother. He could see she was in her way a wise mother. Yet, he had to go. Why? He didn’t want to go. If, on the other hand, he stayed, he would be up against the Finnegans and the Carlins and the Bradys and the Cassidys and the magic of the fields would be disturbed in his imagination.<sup>213</sup>

The ending of the novel illustrates the continuing battle between self and community, the individual rooted in his surroundings. Tarry longs to reveal his artistic soul and battles with ‘the pain’ of what he is leaving behind in Inniskeen: ‘O’ the beauty of what we love, o the pain of roots dragging up’, cementing the struggle which highlights the material world with the mystical insight into the ‘fields which were part of no earthly estate’, the inner world of Kavanagh’s mind.<sup>214</sup> It is ‘the bits and pieces’ of Tarry’s common or ‘peasant’ existence which Kavanagh seeks to represent in order to highlight a kind of divinity within the arts. He believes this is essential for restoring the forgotten faith of the artist in twentieth-century Ireland.

### **Development of self from Plato to modernity**

Kavanagh is a man with an overpowering faith in the power of poetry and the role that the soul plays in the life of the individual. He argues that the ‘mean and vain cannot reach the poet’s remote unapproachable soul’ because their vanity will not allow them ‘to submit to the will of God and be themselves [. . .] The poet’s soul is so

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., pp. 188-189.

intimate, so immediate, so easy to approach, but around is an invisible protecting area [. . .] poised in all its Parnassian authority'.<sup>215</sup>

Critics like Nemo suggest parallels between 'poems about nature' and Emerson's idea of the "oversoul", but it is apparent that this influence is contradicted by Kavanagh himself, who refers to Emerson as 'a sugary humbug [whose] transcendental bunkum sickened me'.<sup>216</sup> What is central to the entire philosophical and literary tradition, beginning with Socrates right through to Shakespeare and Kavanagh, is how morality or the notion of 'the good' becomes central to any understanding of self and community, and this perhaps requires more consideration within academia because the concept of a 'Moral Law' represents the artistic principles and core values of writers from different cultures, including twentieth-century Irish writers such as Yeats, Joyce, O'Flaherty and Kavanagh.<sup>217</sup>

Socrates advocates Plato's most significant philosophical truth when he talks about the relationship between the physical world which appears to us (that which occupies what we know of our community) and what lies within us, in the hidden depths of our soul and personality, when he explains:

It is right to think then, gentlemen, that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care not only for the time we call our life, but for the sake of all time, and that one is in terrible danger if one does not give it care. If death were escape from everything, it would be a great boon to the wicked to get rid of the body and of their wickedness together with the soul. But now that the soul appears to

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<sup>215</sup> Kavanagh, 'Signposts', *Collected Pruse*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>216</sup> Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, p. 229. Nemo's commentary appears in his work *Patrick Kavanagh*, p. 39.

<sup>217</sup> Charles Taylor explores the influence of morality and the good in modern philosophy and society in *Sources of the Self*.

be immortal, there is no escape from evil or salvation for it except by becoming as good and wise as possible.<sup>218</sup>

Plato is the first Western thinker to shape our conception of personal identity ('the self') and the notion of morality, which is constantly invoked by Socrates, 'that the most important thing is not life, but the good life'.<sup>219</sup> The philosophical understanding of self and its relationship to society begins ultimately with him. Many centuries of thought, scepticism and changes in ideology separate us from the world of Plato, Aristotle and ancient philosophy, from theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, through to the philosophers Descartes, Kant, Hume, and more modern thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Russell or Wittgenstein. What these writers prove is that one of the greatest difficulties of commenting on the connection between individual personalities like Kavanagh and the community which surrounds him concerns the danger of presuming too much about what we mean when we talk about 'the self'.

The focus for us has not been on idle speculation or debate about the self, but rather what Kavanagh really meant when he talked about it. We have discussed how he was adamant that the self was a real rather than an imaginary concept, something that was inherent within him because it could not be easily defined or talked about directly, only 'illustrated' or demonstrated through the work of art, since it was a manifestation of the artistic soul. What has not been considered in this chapter is the

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<sup>218</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, p. 92.

<sup>219</sup> Plato, *Crito*, p. 42.

poet's desire to remain free from a view of the self which ultimately tied him to his community and banished any form of liberty for the individual personality. He illustrates this feeling in his poem 'The Self-Slaved', when he remarks:

Me I will throw away.  
Me sufficient for the day  
The sticky self that clings  
Adhesions on the wings  
To love and adventure,  
To go on the grand tour  
A man must be free  
From self-necessity [. . .]  
I will have love, have love [. . .]  
The grace of living  
And wild moments too  
Self when freed from you.<sup>220</sup>

Kavanagh's search is for 'love' and an inner spiritual freedom, a removal from the quarrel with self and community or the personal inner self as egotistical and self-centred, a quest for the selfless shift into divine 'grace'. A new approach in Kavanagh criticism may be one in which the point of view of the poet's personality is central to the idea of the self, where the moral nature of Kavanagh's art is considered from a fresh perspective. He defines 'the poetic mind [as] a moral one, and it is this moral quality which the world cannot stand, for it is a constant reproach' to those elements within society who 'deny the existence of Parnassus [where] in every poet there is something of Christ writing the sins of the people in

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<sup>220</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Self-Slaved', *The Complete Poems*, pp. 293-294.



the dust'.<sup>221</sup>

The quarrel with others is an inevitability, a necessity for those artists who rage against society's lack of courage 'to pronounce a judgement in defiance [. . .] of petty vanity', and so the poet becomes 'no more than the voice of the people', calling for spiritual strength and deliverance from 'self-necessity'.<sup>222</sup> Kavanagh strives for a form of liberty which allows him to be in touch with the divinity in things mortal, where the 'God of life' is to be lived in the normal everyday realities of our existence, and to highlight what belongs to him and to others 'exclusively', as he expresses in 'Thank you, Thank you':

We are not alone in our loneliness,  
Others have been here and known  
Griefs we thought our special own  
Problems that we could not solve  
Lovers that we could not have . . .  
My personality that's to say  
All that is mine exclusively.  
What wisdom's ours if such there be  
Is a flavour of personality . . .  
For most have died the day before  
The opening of that holy door.<sup>223</sup>

In an interview with John Waters in July 2004 Peter Kavanagh identified these lines as central to his brother's vision, outlining Kavanagh's art as a spiritual journey, 'a flash of that beatific vision, something called supernatural grace [. . .] closely aligned

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<sup>221</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Irish Tradition', *Collected Pruse*, p. 234.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>223</sup> Kavanagh, 'Thank You, Thank You,' (Spring 1963), *The Complete Poems*, pp. 350-351. The emphasis on 'holy door' is likely to be ambiguous (a possible pun) and clearly a reference to the spiritual or Catholic influence on Kavanagh's art. It is also worth noting that 'Thank You, Thank You' appeared in *Arena*, and Kavanagh published his late poem 'Yeats' in the magazine *The Holy Door*.

to theology'.<sup>224</sup> In the same interview he emphasised two realities: 'there is the reality where you are sitting here right now [and] a spiritual reality which surrounds us and the poet [. . .] in his most intense form [the poet] stands on the line between the two worlds and occasionally he crosses over to the spiritual world and brings back something unique'.<sup>225</sup>

Patrick Kavanagh's access to the 'unworldly' presence of the divine is shared by the legacy of the great writers before him (Yeats, Joyce, O'Flaherty, Shakespeare) but in becoming part of this world, he penetrates deeply into 'the landscape of his soul [. . .] to get rid of the lies around him [where] the only reality is the reality which one finds within oneself [. . .] the journey of one's soul'.<sup>226</sup> What really matters is 'the individual, the passionate man who speaks from the basis of the sacred reason'.<sup>227</sup> The extent to which Kavanagh shared this link with our next writer, John McGahern, is explored via the philosophical and artistic influences on the author's mind, where the personal life is presented as central to the work of art, and the expression of both self and community.

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<sup>224</sup> John Waters, Interview (televised) with Dr Peter Kavanagh at Trinity College Dublin, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2004.

<sup>225</sup> Interview with Dr Peter Kavanagh.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Kavanagh, 'What is Truth?' *Kavanagh's Weekly*, Saturday, April 26, 1952, Vol. 1, No. 3.

## Chapter 4 McGahern: the self and the quality of love

‘Such outward things dwell not in my desires.’

Shakespeare, *Henry V* (Act IV Scene III).

It is surprising that John McGahern is not more readily and more frequently compared to a writer like Patrick Kavanagh. Perhaps this is because he is best remembered for his fiction and short stories, for his quiet and reserved nature, rather than for the volatility of his mind and character. McGahern records the influence of Kavanagh’s writing in an essay titled ‘The Bird Swift’ and refers to his direct encounter with the poet in the short story, ‘My Love, My Umbrella’, a recollection of experiences of love, early infatuation and sexual activity, which ends in self-realisation and apparent failure, something not uncommon in the world of Kavanagh’s poetry. In the early pages of this story, the male protagonist, eager for the approval of his lover, draws attention to the figure of an eccentric poet, sitting next to them in a Dublin pub. The narrator recalls:

I pointed out a poet to her. I recognized him from his pictures in the paper. His shirt was open-necked inside a gabardine coat and he wore a hat with a small feather in its band [. . .] She asked me if I could hear what the poet was saying to the four men at his table who continually plied him with whiskey. I hadn’t heard. Now we both listened. He was saying he loved the blossoms of Kerr Pinks more than roses, a man could only love what he knew well, and it was the quality of the love that mattered and not the accident. The whole table said they’d drink to that, but he glared at them as if slighted, and

as if to avoid the glare they called for a round of doubles.<sup>1</sup>

In *Memoir* (2005), McGahern's 'autobiographical account' of his early life, which was published one year before his death, he reiterates the same overpowering feeling of hope and 'love' which Kavanagh asserts in this Dublin bar.<sup>2</sup> The memoir is a record of the author's life growing up as a child in rural Ireland, caught between the intimate affections of a dying mother and the memory of physical violence and fear associated with his father. He describes how those 'early years [. . .]' are a partial darkness because we have no power or understanding and are helpless in the face of the world. We grow into an understanding of the world gradually'.<sup>3</sup> As in the author's fiction, the focus is on 'the quality of love' between people, where it is 'the scene not the places that matter'.<sup>4</sup> He is aware that 'every writer is defined by his material' and since he can only write about what he already knows, the 'quality' of all great art is often 'endless repetition', the imitation of previous masters, where the unique personality of the author is at its centre.<sup>5</sup> He records a similar feeling in 'The Bird Swift' in conversation with his close friend, Paddy Swift, when alluding to the poet Kavanagh:

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<sup>1</sup> John McGahern, 'My Love, My Umbrella', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Short Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 59-60.

<sup>2</sup> At 'A Way of Seeing: Fifty Years of McGahern in Print' conference (15th March 2013), Eamonn Hughes commented on the fact that *Memoir* is 'unusual in terms of autobiographical writing' because 'the self' is not named as 'I' and the narrative 'shifts between first and third person stance'. Declan Kiberd alternatively views *Memoir* 'as personal testimony rather than fiction', 'Portraits of a paradise lost', review in *The Irish Times* on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2005.

<sup>3</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> These quotations are recorded from McGahern's own words in a documentary called 'A Private World', directed by Pat Collins (Hummingbird Productions, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

I asked Paddy once how he rhymed Kavanagh's often boorish self with the sensitive and delicate verses. 'My dear boy, separation of Art and Life,' he laughed outright. 'All those delicate love poems are addressed to himself, even if it is sometimes by way of God. Such sensitivity would be wasted on a mere Other.'<sup>6</sup>

McGahern recognises, like Kavanagh, the special power of the individual writer and that the subject of writing is always the self at the heart of the personality, which often includes exploring the difficulties and complexities of personal life, the realisation that 'Much of what we come to know is far from comforting, that each day brings us closer to the inevitable hour when all will be darkness again, but even that knowledge is power and all understanding is joy'.<sup>7</sup> In the end the writer within him must reach out for the affirmation that we ultimately 'grow into a love of the world'.<sup>8</sup> What this 'love' actually is and how it is recorded in the fiction must be examined closely, when we consider both the author's personal recollections and the scenes depicted in the novels or short stories.

In the early pages of *Memoir*, this issue is first raised when McGahern is recalling a conversation with his mother when he was a child:

'Why can't we have a house like those houses, Mammy?'  
'Maybe one day we will - but money and comfort isn't everything. When people are rich it is often harder for them to leave the world.'  
'Does it mean it is harder for them to get to heaven?'  
'It they come to love the world too much it is harder. God is

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<sup>6</sup> John McGahern, 'The Bird Swift', *Love of the Word Essays*, ed. Stanley van der Ziel, intro. Declan Kiberd (London: Faber and Faber), p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir*, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

more important than the world and He sees all.’<sup>9</sup>

The purpose, even in this autobiographical account, is the attempt to resolve the battle between the spiritual and physical realities of the world we know. Children have the tendency to ask deep and probing questions which it is sometimes difficult for adults to answer and yet the fact remains that McGahern is recording the intimacy of such moments and the attempt to make sense of the world around him, to show his own searching, inquisitive mind from an early age. In such instances, he also illustrates how his mother, a quietly religious person and sensitive to her surroundings, is a victim of circumstance and environment exactly because she is not steeped in the pleasures and comforts of the world. It is the public influence of the Church and the Catechism which has assured her of a deeper inner life and of the existence of a paradise beyond Earth, the heavenly ‘kingdom’ which Christ illustrated in the Parable of the Rich Man.<sup>10</sup> In this sense religion is responsible for shaping the spiritual values which McGahern often celebrates and describes as a positive influence. In one interview he explains this process: ‘I always thought that as well as being my most important book the Church was also my first fiction. I think fiction is a very serious thing, that while it is fiction, it is also a revelation of truth, or facts’.<sup>11</sup> It is through these essential ‘facts’ of fiction that he can arrive at an understanding of his real life and environment and so his writing is a way of reliving

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<sup>9</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir*, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Explored in the Synoptic Gospels: Matt. 19:16-26, Mark 10:17-27 and Luke 18:18-27.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Catholicism and National Identity in the works of John McGahern’, interview between Eamon Maher and John McGahern, cited in *The Church and its Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic Question* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2011), p. 187.

what he experienced at home, a looking back to his first 'love of the world'. It is to his mother that he naturally returns, both in his memoirs and in his novels, because of the kindness, compassion and peace associated with her existence, and because she demonstrated to him as a child the values that meant most to her.<sup>12</sup> What he learns through her life is that 'love of the world' does not have to mean a desire for wealth and material possessions, that there is always something more personal to consider within or even beyond ourselves.

Recording life experiences is a priority for the author. McGahern's fiction, like Kavanagh's poetry, is always inward looking, always searching for the positive and the resolution of conflict with the world, evident from the recollections of the pain and suffering of his mother battling terminal cancer, explored in the character of Elizabeth Reegan in *The Barracks*, his debut novel, possibly inspired by poems like 'In Memory of my Mother'. On the evening before Elizabeth learns about her condition, we discover her psychological burden as a soul apparently trapped in a loveless marriage in a community dominated by men, who are simply shaped by tradition and routine and appear to lack any genuine compassion or realisation of her condition. Here the reader can feel only sympathy for her plight:

Reegan sang out the prayers as he sang them every evening of their lives and they were answered in chorus back, murmurs and patterns and repetitions that had never assumed light of meaning, [. . .] Could it be possible that he was praying for her?

She felt delusion of happiness run with such sweetness in

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<sup>12</sup> McGahern recalls walking with his mother as a child and 'the extraordinary sense of peace' associated with this memory, which 'disappears as quickly as it comes', expressed in 'A Private World', dir. Pat Collins.

her for a moment that she felt blessed; but then was it for her he was praying? She couldn't know. She had no means of knowing.<sup>13</sup>

The world of Elizabeth is a constant struggle between internal thoughts and outward anxieties about life, where she is not in 'control' of her destiny, and where her only certainty is death. She is characterised simply by the physical expectations she faces as a woman suffering from 'delusions of happiness'.<sup>14</sup> The fact that McGahern is making efforts as a male artist to understand the point of view of women in Irish society, and the difficulties they face in a world formed very much along patriarchal lines, is an innovative step in Irish literature. The interest is rooted in Joyce's forging of connections between identities of local character and universal significance (when we consider short stories like 'Eveline' or Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness in *Ulysses*), raising interesting questions about what is actually meant by selfhood and identity, both in Irish culture and on a global scale. Human rights, gender equality and sexuality are now prevalent issues in the study of world literature and some critics have recognised in McGahern's fiction a desire to come to terms with these subjects, premature though they may be, in a period when they were not always popularly accepted.<sup>15</sup> This may reflect the tensions in the author's mind between a particular way of seeing the world in the past and one which has become radically transformed in the present.

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<sup>13</sup> John McGahern, *The Barracks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> Several paragraphs prior to this passage we find Elizabeth contemplating the reality that 'Everything might be already outside her control', *The Barracks*, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Antoinette Quinn expresses this argument in her essay, 'A Prayer for my Daughter: Patriarchy in *Amongst Women*,' *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (July 1991).



Catholics will recognise the religious sentiments in Reagan's rituals and 'prayers': the 'patterns and repetitions' of 'unvarying monotony', fused with instinctual 'joy', or the feeling of being 'blessed' at the thought of loved ones praying together in a state of grace.<sup>16</sup> In such moments, McGahern also shares with Kavanagh a 'love' of the little 'bits and pieces' of everyday life, that more private and traditional world of common religious values, exposing the sadness associated with the innocent creatures of the earth crushed by life's circumstances. 'Happiness' can always be restored in simple images, so that where Kavanagh is celebrating the handling of 'Kerr Pinks', McGahern captures the 'grey concrete and steel and glass in the slow raindrop of the morning station' ('Wheels') or the image of an umbrella and the intimate memories associated with it, that reminder 'Of what is past or passing or to come', as Yeats described in 'Sailing to Byzantium'.<sup>17</sup> This need to record a feeling or memory exists in the opening lines of 'My Love, My Umbrella':

It was the rain, the constant weather of this city, made my love  
inseparable from the umbrella, a black umbrella, white stitching  
on the seams of the imitation leather over the handle, the metal  
point bent where it was caught in Mooney's grating as we raced  
for the last bus to the garage out of Abbey's Street.

Here the ritual of naming, what Kavanagh might call 'recording love's mystery', becomes significant, acting as a symbol of the artist's existence, allowing him to 'look on in the business of love' or 'to snatch out of time the passionate

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<sup>16</sup> McGahern, *The Barracks*, p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), p. 95.

transitory'.<sup>18</sup> The fondness for people or places: 'Inniskeen', 'Billy Brennan's Barn' or the objects which illustrate that Kavanagh is still very much alive, such as the 'square cubicles in a row' in 'The Hospital', things that might appear 'insignificant' to others, surface prominently in McGahern's fiction ('an orange peel, a wedding ring, broken glass'). If the emphasis is on a more subtle form of realism, the focus on the image or intimate detail associated with it becomes almost as important as the memory of the experience itself.<sup>19</sup> In 'My Love, My Umbrella', the strong feelings are 'inseparable' from 'the white stitching' and the 'imitation leather over the handle' of the umbrella'.<sup>20</sup> McGahern employs the short story and the novel forms because they create a medium through which he can explore why his existence and personality have value. The novel becomes a mode of relating to the artist's connection with his community because it is 'the most social of all art forms, as it is most closely allied to the idea of manners and an idea of society'.<sup>21</sup> It allows him to remember and structure key events and episodes in his life and reshape these memories through a particular 'vision', style and rhythm, in order to come to terms with his own

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<sup>18</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Hospital'.

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Kamm is one critic who argues that McGahern is a realist writer, commenting: 'It is entirely misleading to earmark McGahern as an 'experimental' writer as his fictions are realistically told, 'John McGahern', ed. Rüdiger Imhof, *Contemporary Irish Novelists* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990), p. 187.

<sup>20</sup> Kavanagh, 'The Hospital'. The title for McGahern's story may be inspired by the final words of Joyce's *Giacomo Joyce*: 'Envoy: Love me, love my umbrella', ed. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce: Poems and Shorter Writings*, p. 241.

<sup>21</sup> Selected from Eamer Maher's interview with McGahern on 22 August 2002, cited in *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003), p. 144.

distinctive self as a man and an artist.<sup>22</sup> If the author's personality is at the centre of his fiction, there appears to be a discrepancy between what McGahern wants to achieve in his own mind and how he views the world around him. It is evident that the novelist is articulating, in a subtle form at least, something that is apparently festering beneath the surface of his society, where it appears, as it does so often with all great writers, that the mind of the artist is decades before its time. He effectively questions underlying private concerns which later become publically accepted standards and expectations. In our modern global society of internet and mobile technology, the pendulum appears to have swung in a very different direction, something that could well relate to the influence of secularism in global affairs and politics, infringing on traditional religious practice and Church teachings and we know that the author has personally commented on the way in which his society has changed, or is currently changing.<sup>23</sup>

James Whyte argues that 'the specifics of a writer's environment [...] are irrelevant to the writer [...] it is the way they are transformed by love or the author's vision, that is important: "It's the quality of the love of the place and not the place

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<sup>22</sup> McGahern claims that 'autobiographical fiction, [. . .] is almost always bad writing. Language itself is an artifice', see 'An Interview with John McGahern', James Whyte, *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1969), p. 235.

<sup>23</sup> McGahern describes 'A Private World' that 'Everything changes [. . . I'm too old to see what has replaced it'. He also reflects in interview with Eamon Maher: 'Today the climate has swung to the opposite extreme in that everything religious is now held in deep suspicion', cited in Eamon Maher, *The Church and its Spire: John McGahern and the Catholic Question* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2011), p. 20.

itself that matters" '.<sup>24</sup> Patrick Kavanagh certainly agreed with this philosophy when he stated that 'our real roots lie in our capacity for love and its abandon'.<sup>25</sup> McGahern similarly centralises the role of the individual writer, arguing that 'no matter how society attempts to legislate for literature, with its prizes, its honours, its book clubs, university courses or censorship boards, it all finally comes to that essential and potentially subversive figure alone with a book'.<sup>26</sup> Despite this interest in both the 'solitary' pursuit of reading and writing, the author is constantly negotiating between his internal thoughts and the world outside of his mind. This means that he can never quite escape from the realities of his home life or environment, except perhaps by temporarily losing himself 'in a favourite book' or by 'waking out' of the world of his unconscious imagination. Themes of memory, place and time are, as a consequence, familiar in the fiction of McGahern, illustrating the Yeatsian sense that 'art' is a kind of 'vision of reality', a portal into the landscape of the mind, which convinces the novelist of happiness in the face of despair.<sup>27</sup> He does not go so far as to abandon 'technique' or rely virtually on instinct alone to achieve this 'vision', as may be the case with O'Flaherty or Kavanagh, but he does insist that 'technique' is 'heartless' or meaningless if it cannot offer a 'clear mirror',

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in James Whyte, *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Kavanagh, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', *Collected Prose*, p. 223.

<sup>26</sup> McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', *Love of the World*, p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> Yeats, 'Ego Dominus Tuus', *The Major Works*, p. 74.

'image' or 'reflection of personality in language'.<sup>28</sup> He explains this feeling further in a short essay called 'Playing with Words':

Work often begins with an image or a rhythm or a line of dialogue which stays in the mind and will not go away until it is written down. Often, after it is written down, it goes away, it is nothing; sometimes it results in work that lasts for months and years. I write to see into what world those phrases and images that will not go away will lead me, to give that world being and shape [ . . . ] If I had any quarrel today with 'The Image', it is that it is perhaps too serious'.<sup>29</sup>

The main 'quarrel' for McGahern is with the art form itself and 'The Image' is the closest this author comes to a kind of manifesto of the soul, a longing to actualise through art his own vision of reality: the novelist's 'love of the world' and 'deliberate happiness'.<sup>30</sup> 'The Image' becomes the struggle with his own nature, where the burning desire for 'man's perfection' that we find in O'Flaherty's novels or 'the comic spirit' of Kavanagh's poetry, is somehow translated into a deeper, more philosophical approach to the truth about oneself and others. The 'spiritual quality' which shaped these earlier Irish writers is still present in the fiction, and the novelist is certainly haunted by universal themes such as sex, violence, death, place and time, where he is determined to record important memories in order to hold on to the past in some way. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the ideas expressed in 'Playing with Words' have connections with modern poets such as Heaney, for example in the

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<sup>28</sup> McGahern, *Love of the World*, p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> John McGahern, *Love of the Word*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Yeats, *Ego Dominus Tuus*, *The Major Works*, p. 74.

final line of 'Follower', in which the poet fixes his father permanently in his mind, as an image that 'will not go away', or even with dramatists like Brian Friel, in the playwright's ability to capture the power of memory and its essential role in formulating who and what we are.<sup>31</sup> Art is the signal for such a release, the search for answers to the puzzle of the writer's existence, of coming to a fuller, more comprehensive understanding of self and community, and so it has to be pursued to the end, it cannot be so easily pushed aside as if it is 'just a job' like any other, chiefly because it is sown into the very soul of its creator. All poets share the same sensibility, as Edward Thomas once illustrated in the poem 'It Rains', where the art form allows the writer a way of revisiting the past through a specific image.<sup>32</sup> Literature rekindles a love of the writer's existence in a particular moment, so that for McGahern 'the past and present are all the same in the mind [. . .] they are just pictures', platforms by which the artist can raise questions about his existence and his relationship with others within or beyond time itself.<sup>33</sup> What the reader finds is a kind of 'Medusa's mirror' or emulation of great art, through the author's own

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<sup>31</sup> Heaney, 'Follower', *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 25. Original copies of correspondence between McGahern and Heaney are in existence. Raymond Mullen and Adam Bargroff describe the initial meeting between McGahern and Heaney at St Thomas' Secondary School in Ballymurphy in 1963. They claim that the two writers became 'friends and kindred spirits [. . .] engaging in a phenomenological exercise of retrieving the self while simultaneously "achieving a new self"', 'Introduction' to ed. Mullen, Bargroff and Mullen, *John McGahern: Critical Essays* (Peter Lang: Bern, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas' poem explores a recollection of two lovers kissing in the rain: 'suspended still and ghostly white'. There is a primary focus on memory and its effect on the speaker: 'The past hovering as it revisits the light', quoted in *Collected Poems of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> As expressed by the character Kate Ruttledge, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 77.

distinctive style.<sup>34</sup> The need to recreate experience is always present, so that it becomes a vocation and a necessity in the same way that for Kavanagh the great writer must inevitably 'burst a road' into the world of literature, regardless of plight or circumstances. This feeling is mirrored in McGahern's own words: 'People who need to read, who need to think and see, will always find a way round a foolish system, and difficulty will only make that instinct stronger, as it serves in another sphere to increase desire'.<sup>35</sup>

The extent to which the author's quarrel with community influenced his art requires careful consideration in this chapter because the various novels and short stories incorporate experiences of living in Ireland and the novelist's feelings about the Catholic Church or the political institutions of his time. His criticisms of how sexuality and personal feelings were often suppressed in the country of his youth are very similar to the views expressed by Kavanagh, and like the poet he celebrates the mysteries and 'joys' associated with the ceremonies of the Church and the comfort of both belonging to a community and being somewhat estranged from it because of the nature of his art and personality. He may not share Kavanagh's ardent belief in the mystical associations of art or in validating the existence of the God of poetry or of life, but he is equally indebted to the religious influences of Catholicism on his art and of the ultimate pursuit of happiness, in both literature and life. This explains why characters like Young Mahoney in *The Dark* (1965), scarred by physical and

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<sup>34</sup> McGahern, 'The Image', *Love of the World*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', *Love of the World*, p. 92.

mental abuse in a religious climate of censorship and sectarianism, must also recognise the good within Irish society and the liberation of release through absolution, following the act of confession: 'There was such joy. You were forgiven, the world given back to you, washed clean as snow'.<sup>36</sup>

McGahern has personally admitted that he has 'nothing but praise for the Catholic Church [which] provided the only notion [he remembers] of poetry, of truth'.<sup>37</sup> We know how important this feeling of 'honesty' or sincerity proved to Yeats, Joyce, O'Flaherty and Kavanagh, but we are equally conscious of the inherent tensions between state, religion and the art form itself. McGahern reminds us of this fact when he recounts the experiences of living with his father in the barracks at Cootehall, County Roscommon, shortly after his mother's premature death:

The barracks itself was a strange place, like most of the country at the time. Though the Free State had been wrested in armed conflict with Britain, it was like an inheritance that nobody quite understood or knew how to manage. The Catholic Church was dominant and in control of almost everything, directly or indirectly. In a climate of suppression and poverty and fear, there was hardly any crime and little need of a barracks in a place like Cootehall, other than as a symbol.<sup>38</sup>

The author expresses a recognisable ambivalence about life in Irish society, identifying the important shaping influences of his religion in forging the necessary spiritual values of the self, whilst realising the shortcomings of a society which

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<sup>36</sup> McGahern, *The Dark* (London: Quartet, 1977), p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick Godon's interview with John McGahern recorded in *Scrivener: A Literary magazine* (Montreal) 5, no. 2 (Summer 1984), p. 26, and cited in Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 1993), p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir*, p. 32.



appears insular and anathema to artistic expression.

McGahern was born in Dublin in 1934 during a period in Irish history when the Church 'dominated' and controlled every aspect of communal life.<sup>39</sup> In this context, his literature can be seen as a quest to understand both the personal experiences of the artist and the complex forces which shape Irish history and society.<sup>40</sup> The quarrel within the writer is between the memory of the love and compassion he experienced in the early years living with his mother, and the darkness associated with the aftermath of her death, in particular the recollections of the Cootehall barracks where he later came to live with his father - a 'strange place', synonymous in his mind with the draconian nature of his community. The culture of fear in Ireland at this time becomes 'a symbol' for the young McGahern, a way of enforcing a particular feeling or attitude on the individual, effectively controlling or censoring his freedom of expression. He recognises that if a writer is to survive in such a 'climate of suppression and fear', he must learn to defend himself through words, to react against his community in the same way that Yeats and Shaw outlined in their letter to members of the Irish Academy of Letters.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> McGahern admits in an interview with Eamon Maher that in this period 'the Church dominated everything', cited in *The Church and its Spire*, p. 185.

<sup>40</sup> James Whyte contends that 'Much of the criticism, of his earlier work in particular, takes McGahern's fiction as social documentary and focuses upon its representation of Irish society. On the other hand, there is a body of criticism which concentrates on McGahern's art', Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern*, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> This letter, addressed to the members of the Irish Academy in September 1932, outlined the writers' reaction against 'official censorship', cited in *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and The Irish Writer*, ed. Julia Carson (London: Routledge, 1990 by Article 19), pp. 7-8.

The connection with Joyce is particularly acute: that well-known letter to Nora in which the writer complains bitterly that he is at war with every 'religious and social force in the country' could be easily related to McGahern's attack on the Church's hostility to 'sexuality', which he sees as 'just a part of life'.<sup>42</sup> As in Joyce's fiction, the violence of characters and personalities in real life virtually become inseparable from the state and society in which they live in the author's imaginary world. One only has to compare the record of Joyce's personal humiliation at Clongowes College with Stephen Dedalus' experiences of corporal punishment at the hands of Father Dolan in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This physical violence is recreated in the life of the Young Mahoney and it follows that the presentation of McGahern's real father in *Memoir* becomes a mirror image of the character of the elder Mahoney in *The Dark*:

My father would come down the stairs in his shirt and trousers and unlaced boots. The fire had to be going by then, the kettle boiling. We went through these mornings on tiptoe. While he sharpened his open razor on a leather strap that hung from the wall [. . .]  
(*Memoir*).<sup>43</sup>

He [Mahoney] took the leather strap he used for sharpening his razor from its nail on the side of the press. Come with me. Upstairs. I'll teach you a lesson for once. I'll teach you a lesson for once', he said with horrible measured passion through his teeth (*The Dark*).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Eamon Maher, *The Church and its Spire*, p. 187. Joyce's letters to Nora reveal an increasing anxiety about the quarrel with his community: 'It seemed to me that I was fighting a battle with every religious and social force in Ireland for you [. . .] There is no life here, no naturalness or honesty', *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 25-30.

<sup>43</sup> McGahern, *Memoir*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>44</sup> McGahern, *The Dark*, p. 7.

*The Dark*, the author's second novel, was banned in Ireland under the Censorship Act because it signalled to the authorities at that time a world which they would rather forget, one which they preferred to remain hidden from public notice or scrutiny. We find the recent cases of sexual and domestic abuse which shock us in the headlines today implicitly denoted in the novel, a testimony to the fact that McGahern's fiction probes deeply into the nature of personal experience and conflict in modern society, both in the conscience of the individual victims and in the mind's eye of the public. This explains the deeply psychological nature of novels like *The Dark* and the recurring images of violence which permeate the narrative. And yet if the adolescent self, in the form of the young Mahoney, is left scarred and alone to brood over the 'confusion of all these scattered images',<sup>45</sup> the hope is always for the restoration of a new kind of selfhood through the liberation of education, and the cathartic release of the art form itself:

One day, one day, you'd come to more real authority than all this, an authority that had need of neither vast buildings nor professorial chairs nor robes nor solemn organ tones, an authority that was simply a state of mind, a calmness even in the face of the turmoil of your own passing.<sup>46</sup>

The 'real authority' for the writer is to 'escape' the memory of past hardships and to free himself from the restrictions of community. It is a recurring theme in Irish literary history - for Joyce the preoccupation is self-exile and the 'cunning' retreat

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<sup>45</sup> McGahern, *The Dark*, p. 125.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

from the 'nightmare' of Irish history, whereas for the later Heaney it becomes the repressed desire to escape 'from the massacre'.<sup>47</sup> McGahern recognises the outward public show of 'vast buildings' and 'professorial chairs' and the petty squabbling of others, but realises this must be transformed into 'calmness even in the face of the turmoil': that satisfaction of the inner person embodied in the spiritual values of his mother. There is always a need to relieve the tensions of life and community through the craft of reading and writing.

The author recalls learning from the art and lives of other writers, a way of blotting out the memory and affliction of 'the dark lavatory'. It is through exposure to the literature of his artistic predecessors that McGahern is able to carry on a tradition of expression which is interested not only in the resolution of the author's conflict with the world, but to create an inner peace that allows the complete personality of the author to flourish. This can only be accomplished through the 'style' and 'image' of the work of art and through the emergence of what Yeats calls 'the actual man' behind the 'elaboration of beauty', the artist who is always in pursuit of 'an ordered passion'.<sup>48</sup>

As the only writer in this study to be born in the wake of Irish independence, McGahern is our closest link to the lives and works of Yeats, Joyce, O'Flaherty and

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<sup>47</sup> Stephen Dedalus refers to 'History' as 'a nightmare from which I am trying to awake', *Ulysses*, p. 42; Seamus Heaney's phrase, 'Escaped from the massacre', appears in the poem 'Exposure', cited in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 144.

<sup>48</sup> Yeats describing his own father, John Butler Yeats, not caring 'for a fine lyric passage unless he felt some actual man behind its elaboration of beauty', Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 'Reveries Over Childhood and Youth', *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume III*, (New York: Scribner, 1999), pp. 80-81, cited in Sampson, *Young John McGahern*, p. 71.

Kavanagh. He describes himself as part of 'the first generation [. . .] born into an independent state', and feeling 'a citizen of this state' believes that there was no need for its leaders to censor opinions or invoke laws which ultimately repressed individuals, 'to isolate society so it [would] conform to a very limited, narrow idea of itself'.<sup>49</sup> It is the writer alone who will 'unconsciously reflect [. . .] society' through his distinctive style and vision.<sup>50</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to consider the particular literary and philosophical influences which define the author's art, and to explore how his writing establishes a comprehensive assessment of self and community in modern Irish writing.

### **Key influences: 'imitation of the masters'**

Denis Sampson reminds us that in 'The Solitary Reader' McGahern records Kavanagh and Beckett as the 'two living writers who meant most' to him. The novelist was moved by the poet's search for 'authentic expression' which provided him with 'a model' for his stories, in which 'the depiction of country life would always be central'.<sup>51</sup> It is also suggested that the connection with Beckett may have interested McGahern because of this writer's tendency to strike out on his own as an aloof, independent artist. Sampson draws attention to the aesthetic influences on McGahern's art, although he does not always consider the more direct link between

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<sup>49</sup> 'The Personal Experience of Censorship': an interview with John McGahern, *Banned in Ireland*, ed. Julia Carson, pp. 64-65.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>51</sup> Denis Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist*, pp. 49-52.

these writers — the concern with a deeper ‘dialogue’ involving ‘philosophical ideas and traditions’.<sup>52</sup> It could be the particular emphasis on feeling, the link to Cartesianism (separation of mind and body), the need to make sense of the authorial voice, to question the uncertainty of any fixed perspectives about self and society, which interests McGahern. Beckett asserted a stylistic contrast to that of Joyce as ‘synthesiser’, referring to himself as ‘an analyser’, who finds his ‘own way’ by reducing artistic material to ‘impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding’, admitting that after the writing of *Molloy*: ‘I understood my own stupidity. Then I began to write down what I feel’.<sup>53</sup> The interest in Beckett’s move away from that Joycean desire of ‘expanding’ horizons (of ‘knowing more’), to a feeling of retreat and withdrawal into the personal self, may explain why McGahern expressed an interest in Joyce but could never really feel close to him. Seamus Deane suggests that Beckett’s writing ‘is calculated to arouse indecision in the reader’ because conventional forms of plot and narrative are ‘supplanted by the techniques of meditation [. . .] the search for an essence that does not exist [. . .] full of doubt, of permanently suspended judgement’ and it may be this lack of knowing which fundamentally defines or drives McGahern’s protagonists

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<sup>52</sup> Sampson states that ‘Beckett did not set out to expound any philosophical orientation’, outlining that *Waiting for Godot* ‘has no clear dialogue with philosophical ideas or traditions’, *Ibid.*, p. 54. Critics such as Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1969) have suggested otherwise—that the play is ‘open to philosophical, religious and psychological interpretations’ (pp. 61-62). In *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (1968), Hugh Kenner contends that Beckett is largely influenced by Cartesian philosophy.

<sup>53</sup> Citation from James Knowlson’s biography of Beckett, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp. 352-353.

into a state of contemplation and introspection.<sup>54</sup> This does not mean that he accepts modern literary theories concerning 'The Death of the Author' or of a 'decentred subject for the artistic self', because he is always emphasising the fact that the writer 'needs to feel deeply and to think clearly in order to find the right words', and in the end his personality must be considered.<sup>55</sup>

Sampson outlines several further influences on McGahern's art: notably the writings of Yeats, Joyce, Proust and Flaubert, all of which played an integral part in the novelist's aesthetic or artistic formation.<sup>56</sup> The fact that McGahern's Irish counterparts each had their own similar influences is striking and at times it seems as if the emulation of each work of art from the one before becomes curiously reinvented or recreated into a unique or 'distinctive self'.<sup>57</sup> Heaney describes McGahern's art, not as repetition as such, but as a way of 'retrieving himself' or 'achieving a new self'.<sup>58</sup> Sampson similarly highlights the impact of both art and life on the author's state of mind, that it is 'the emergence of the writing self from the autobiographical experience [which] is the life-blood' of the author's achievement [...] But it is not in a literal sense of transcription, reportage or exposé that the autobiographical issue is central. It is in the Yeatsian sense that poetry is made from

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<sup>54</sup> Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), pp. 124-127.

<sup>55</sup> McGahern makes this clear in his interview with James Whyte, cited in *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*, p. 235.

<sup>56</sup> 'If McGahern became an artist through an affinity with Yeats, the foundations of his medium of prose fiction were laid by reference to two figures in particular, Joyce and Proust, although both of them have an ancestor, Flaubert, and a descendent, Beckett, who also played major parts in defining his medium' Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern*, p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> Sampson, *Young John McGahern*, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Heaney, 'Shedding the Skin of Youth', *Sunday Independent*, 26 January 1975, p. 9.

the quarrel with oneself'.<sup>59</sup> If we are to take Sampson's quotation literally, there is the danger of simplifying this writer's quest as a mere struggle within or as a need to tell his life-story through fiction, when in fact McGahern is instinctively driven to resolve internal struggles because of familial or communal tensions.<sup>60</sup> These 'memories' seem to cloud his vision: emerging through violent or haunting images of fear, persecution and childhood trauma throughout his writing.

Consider a novel like *The Leavetaking* (1974), published more than ten years after *The Barracks*, where we find the author still shifting back and forth between time-frames and never quite settled in his life choices, to the point where we recognise the protagonist Patrick Moran, remorsefully questioning his failure to grant his mother's dream that he should become a priest. Instead he chooses to become a schoolteacher and he is forever trapped in the immovable image of his mother's death and the sense of betrayal which he feels he is party to: 'That I would deny her death with my living death. That I would keep faith. But I was not able to keep faith'.<sup>61</sup> At this stage in his life and career, McGahern cannot conform to a rigid sense of 'faith' or establish peaceful resolution within the mind, mainly because his artistic sensibility as a writer cannot deny 'the pull of nature' which leads to 'the

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<sup>59</sup> Sampson, *Young John McGahern*, p. 59

<sup>60</sup> McGahern comments on this process in his essay 'The Life, the Work and the Hurt', a consideration of John Halperin's *Novelists in Their Youth*, pondering how much great art 'comes to us from neurotics' or from individuals with a 'nervous disorder'. McGahern appears sceptical of the 'simplification' of art in general terms, as the result of some 'obscure hurt' or merely shaped by life experiences alone, *Love of the World*, pp. 351-353.

<sup>61</sup> John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 85. Earlier in the novel McGahern writes: 'I'd never have been a teacher, I see clearly, but for my mother', p. 25. Joyce, too, failed to 'keep faith' with his mother's wishes when he refused to kneel at her bedside in her final moments, putting his own principles before his sense of religious duty.



dream of woman' and because his personal life has come to the critical attention of the state authorities in Ireland. He is plagued both by memories of his troubled past and by feelings of doubt or uncertainty about his present circumstances in the world.<sup>62</sup> He is forever critical of the Church's insistence on the celibate life because (as he sees it), 'we are sexual from the moment we are born' and he feels that institutional religion in Ireland has effectively 'turned this powerful and abiding emotion' into something negative, 'surrounding it with shame and sin'.<sup>63</sup> For McGahern, teaching becomes the compromising alternative: 'the second priesthood',<sup>64</sup> a way of making amends for failing yet again to live up to his mother's expectations, just as before when he failed to spend time with her during her final moments of life:

A shadow was to fall forever on the self of my life from the morning of that room, shape it as the salt and wind shape the trees [. . .] O but if only I could have had back then that whole hour I had wasted down with the lorry on the cinders so that I could see her stir or smile. I would see her forever. She must have felt that I too had abandoned her in the emptying of the house and the horrible beating apart of the iron.<sup>65</sup>

The fact that this scene is vividly recalled in similar fashion in *Memoir* proves how significantly it plays over and over in the author's mind.<sup>66</sup> One could argue that this 'self,' in the form of a first person narrator, is not McGahern; if this is so, why does the author return to this theme of remorse in his writing? Perhaps more than

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<sup>62</sup> McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, p. 85

<sup>63</sup> McGahern, 'Five Drafts', *Love of the World*, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, p. 85.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-75.

<sup>66</sup> This scene is recalled on pages 123-124 of *Memoir*, with the memory of 'the sound of the metal', the reference to 'beating' and the similar dialogue between the son, mother, driver and uncle.

any other Irish writer, besides Joyce, the sense of guilt at the memory or loss of mother-child relationship is exposed. The figurative language ('shape it as the salt and wind shape') fused with dynamic verbs like 'beating' reflect the pain of the young boy and the later artist torn between emotions of fear and loss. We are reminded of Stephen Dedalus' stricken remorse when his mother 'Silently' appears to him in dream, with 'her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes [. . .] a faint odour of wetted ashes'.<sup>67</sup> The image of Dedalus' mother vomiting 'the green sluggish bile' is curiously revisited in the mind of young Moran, who recalls 'the stream of grey vomit pour from [his mother's] mouth into the nettles of the margin', something which the author similarly records in *Memoir*.<sup>68</sup> McGahern is thus haunted by his past and cannot help but escape from it except through the art of fiction, a way of soothing the pain of memory, or as he calls it: 'escaping into reality'.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, there is the danger of reading too much into his art as a form of catharsis from a painful past, in a way that one might do with O'Flaherty, and McGahern has warned against any such interpretations:

What I do know is that personal therapy has no place in art. Art has to conform to an idea or a way of seeing. Self-expression is always bad writing. It's one of the fascinations of art - and the more I know of it the more fascinating this becomes - that the more the material is worked into an artifice, the more true feeling

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<sup>67</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, p. 66; the reference from *Memoir* (p.22) reads: 'As we walked to school in the morning, [. . .] my mother quietly excused herself and turned aside. A grey stream poured from her mouth in the long grass and nettles growing on the margins of the road'.

<sup>69</sup> 'Interview with Eamon Maher', *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003), p. 147.

is set free [. . .] the material has to be reinvented in order to recreate the emotion and to dramatise or illuminate the facts.<sup>70</sup>

Kavanagh's conception of 'the self [. . .] as an illustration' or Yeats' idea of moulding the work of literature 'Into the artifice of eternity' is more appealing to the author than the thought of exorcising past demons, as there is always the fear that efforts to write about 'personal life' can lead to something that is 'both irrelevant and untrue'.<sup>71</sup> McGahern also warns that there is a danger of relying too much on what the writer says about his own work and there is much material in his 'dark' past, in the parallels between fiction and real life, to ignore the fact that his writing is at least, in some form, an entry into memories and experiences of life at home. The author is drawn inevitably, like Yeats, to the artistic tradition of self-conquest within the writer, the pursuit of his own distinctive 'style by sedentary toil' and also by Joyce's notion of 'liberating from the personalised lumps of matter that which is their individuating rhythm', thereby establishing art through 'a fluid succession of presents'.<sup>72</sup> It is for these reasons that he feels compelled to write and, like his literary predecessors, is driven by a 'secret vocation' at an early age, as Sampson explains:

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<sup>70</sup> 'An Interview with John McGahern', ed. James Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*, p. 235.

<sup>71</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Self Portrait', *Collected Prose*, p. 13; Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', *The Major Works*, p. 95.

<sup>72</sup> Yeats' quotation appears in his poem 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and Joyce's words appear in the essay he wrote in 1904 entitled 'A Portrait of the Artist' ed. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce: Poems and Shorter Writings*, p. 211.

McGahern referred to fiction as the *dramatization* of the inner life [. . .] That dream was to become a writer, the plan that came to him during his solitary hours reading on the river. Over many days and months, gradually, a fantastical idea formed. Why take on any single life—a priest, a soldier, teacher, doctor, airman—if a writer could create all these people far more vividly [. . .] his ‘secret vocation’ defined him from this point on.<sup>73</sup>

This ‘way of seeing’ himself, of understanding the conflict between writer and community is not unfamiliar, encountered as we have discovered in Yeats’ exploration of the mask or his ‘vision of reality’; in Joyce’s desire for the writer’s aesthetic distance and ‘spiritual liberation’; in the psychological burden of O’Flaherty’s ‘secret mind’; or even in Kavanagh’s pursuit of the ‘secret sign’. The artistic connections cannot be ignored, and often appear in defiance of the pursuit of wealth, privilege or some other physical or bodily obsession. It is a much borrowed theme, like ‘The Moral Law’ that governs great literature. McGahern’s fiction also has antecedents in the European tradition, with the influence of French writers such as Flaubert and Proust. Scholars especially recognise Proust’s essay ‘Days of Reading’ as a profound influence on McGahern’s art, mainly in the way that the writer demonstrates how reading helps to formulate an understanding of our true selves:

An intelligent mind knows how to subordinate reading to its personal activity. Reading is for it but the noblest of distractions, the most ennobling one of all, for only reading and knowledge produce the "good manners" of the mind. We can develop the power of our sensibility and our intelligence only within ourselves, in the depths of our spiritual life. But it is in this contact with other

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<sup>73</sup> Sampson, *Young John McGahern*, pp. 11-19.

minds, which reading is, that the education of the "manners" of the mind is obtained.<sup>74</sup>

Reading empowers the author, allowing him to see 'into the life of things', to recognise connections between his own experiences and that of others and to realise the power of his art in expressing the hidden life of the artist, of revealing the truth about his personality. The idea of 'good manners' may illustrate the importance of balance and serenity within the mind, but it also has a religious context for McGahern, beginning with his first experiences of the Catholic Church in Ireland, through which he claims he 'came to know all [he'd] know about manners, of ceremony, of sacrament, of grace'.<sup>75</sup> It is the orderliness of this religion which he sees in connection with the tidiness of the mind, where the thirst for knowledge and inner spiritual strength is such that 'in spite of everything, literary men are still like the aristocracy of the intelligence, and not to know a certain book, a certain particularity of literary science, will always remain, even in a man of genius, a mark of intellectual commonness'.<sup>76</sup>

The writer's quest, though it so often appears as an inward struggle alone, must also recognise the conflict with others, particularly in modern Ireland, where notions of political allegiance and national identity are forever problematic. We know that revolutionary struggle, civil war, political unrest and the tensions of

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<sup>74</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin: Prefaces to La Bible d'Amiens and Sésame et les Lys with Selections from the Notes to the Translated Texts*, trans and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford and Philip J. Wolfe; intro. Richard Macksey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 125.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with McGahern, Eamon Maher, *The Church and its Spire*, p. 180.

<sup>76</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin*, p. 125.

community are universal problems which can affect any society or country at a given time. What makes Irish culture most interesting is that these 'troubles' have not been confined to one particular period in history and have been a recurring problem for its people, a fact ingrained in the educated mind of the writer who is always aware of this complexity in defining personal identity. This issue may explain the various personalities shaped by anxieties in the fiction, prompting writers like Daniel Corkery, in works like *The Hidden Ireland*, to conclude: 'the essence of national life, consisting as it always does, of an intellectual and spiritual inheritance, is stuff for the artist, rather than for the historian'.<sup>77</sup> If Irish literature, due to its incredible diversity, appears different from other literatures, it is also deeply influenced by the power of individual personalities, often forced to question the turbulence of public events and violent action, the legacy of colonialism, the dominant power of religion or conformity to Church authority, all of which have their parts to play in the shaping of the Irish self.<sup>78</sup>

The latter issues particularly dominate McGahern's train of thought in both fiction and reality. Take, for instance, the following questions which appear in the early fiction and in the final memoirs, where each time he is reflecting on his own

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<sup>77</sup> Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland*, p. 61. These ideas could also be attributed to writers such as O'Flaherty, O'Connor, Kavanagh, O'Faolain or McGahern, who each created characters emblematic of their times, figures such as Gypo Nolan, Jeremiah Donovan, Patrick Maguire, old Henn or the elderly Mahoney and Moran.

<sup>78</sup> Edward Said contends: 'there is in all nationally defined cultures, I believe, an aspiration to sovereignty, to sway, and to dominance [. . .] At the same time, paradoxically, we have never been as aware as we now are of how oddly hybrid historical and cultural experiences are, of how they partake of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross national boundaries, defy the police action of simple dogma and loud patriotism', *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 15.

nature or pondering whether or not family members are shaped by personal identity (self) or community:

Was my life beaten into its shape in this schoolroom day by those forces or would it have grown similar even if the forces were otherwise? (*The Leavetaking*).

The worlds to come, hell and heaven and purgatory and limbo were closer and far more real than America or Australia and talked about almost daily as our future reality [. . .] Who can tell whether certain temperaments are ever influenced by nurture? They were both violent and wilful (*Memoir*).<sup>79</sup>

It would seem that the turmoil is indeed an inner struggle, as Yeats predicted, but in fact this poet is essentially echoing traditions and centuries of thought in that familiar allusion to ‘the quarrel’ with the ‘self’, at least as far as the history of philosophy is concerned. In our current society, this is a struggle which must always extend to ‘the physical world’ beyond one’s conscience and personality. In *Mindfulness* (2014), Christophe André makes a connection between Eastern Buddhism and the personal self, where it is considered that ‘the way that we see and understand reality strongly influences our well-being’.<sup>80</sup> André claims that ‘The interdependence of everything reminds us that nothing on earth has absolute existence as a fixed, isolated entity’, that we do not ‘exist as an autonomous subject

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<sup>79</sup> The first quotation from *The Leavetaking* (p48) suggests that McGahern is questioning his own nature and what essentially shaped his personality; the second quotation from *Memoir* (p6) is in reference to the religious nature of his life growing up in the Barracks and specifically questions the shaping of his father’s and grandmother’s temperaments. O’Flaherty raises similar questions about the nature of Maupassant’s writing in his letter to Kitty Tailer, 8 July 1967, *The Letters*, p. 404.

<sup>80</sup> ‘I don’t exist as an autonomous subject independent of my environment. I owe my life and its continuation to an infinite number of other people, along with any other natural phenomena’, Christophe André, *Mindfulness: 25 ways of living in the moment through art* (London: Rider Books, 2014), p. 163.

independent' of environment.<sup>81</sup>

In modern Western culture, this view of the self as connected to or within the world was influenced mainly by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger in works like *Being and Time*, where the nature of 'Dasein' ('Being-there') was questioned profoundly. What exactly constituted the 'physical world' and our essential impression or understanding of community had certainly been a matter of philosophical debate for centuries before Heidegger, most especially among Enlightenment figures like Immanuel Kant. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood claim that Kant not only undermined or challenged 'the arguments of traditional metaphysics but also put in their place a scientific metaphysics of his own, which establishes what can be known *a priori* [knowledge independent of experience] but also limits it to that which is required for ordinary experience [*a posteriori*]'.<sup>82</sup> This philosopher tried to come to terms with the notion of selfhood as a debate concerning what exists both within and outside of experience, as Ian Burkitt explains:

Kant believed that there existed a screen that separated humans from the world as it existed 'in itself'. This screen exists because he thought humans could never make sense of their experiences if impressions gained from the world were communicated directly to the mind by the senses [ . . . ] Human individuals, as Kant perceives them, are so isolated inside their own shell they feel themselves to be separated from everything that is perceived as outside.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>82</sup> Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, 'Introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason', *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1998), p. 3 [first published 1781].

<sup>83</sup> Ian Burkitt, *Social Selves: Theories of the Social Formation of Personality* (London: SAGE publications Ltd, 1991), pp. 6-7. Kant articulated a philosophy concerning knowledge of objects based on experience (the 'phenomenal') and the world which is independent of our experience or consciousness (the 'noumenal'), inevitably raising that conscious debate between what is instinctive or spiritual within and what is largely determined or shaped by our community.



In modern times this 'screen' or 'shell' might take the form of social alienation or possible eccentricity, what Philip Larkin illustrates in his poem '*Vers de Société*', through expressions such as: '*All solitude is selfish*' and '*Virtue is social*', or perhaps through Nietzsche's earlier concept of *Übermensch*, the person who can live independently and also dominate others. But the general focus on the isolated individual as an autonomous thinker, where the subject is, as McGahern maintains, 'that subversive figure alone with a book', became the central preoccupation of the Enlightenment, most notably through Kant's philosophy.<sup>84</sup>

Heidegger later considers Kant's efforts to make sense of whether or not 'the external world can be proved' in Chapter 6 of *Being and Time* by questioning the nature of being 'in me' and 'outside of me', asserting that both are unquestionably interlinked: 'What Kant proves—if we may suppose that his proof is correct and correctly based—is that entities which are changing and entities which are permanent are necessarily present-at-hand together'.<sup>85</sup> It follows that in Heidegger's view there can be no separation between the self and the world: 'understanding of the world, as understanding of Dasein, is self-understanding. Self and world belong

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<sup>84</sup> McGahern confirms his interest in the literature and ideas of the eighteenth century in his interview with Eamon Maher, 'From the Local to the Universal', p. 155.

<sup>85</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), p. 248.

together in one being, Dasein. Self and world are not two beings'.<sup>86</sup> Michael Zimmerman defines this process more clearly in the form of a first person 'subject':

I come to know myself not so much by abstract self-reflection as by taking on roles in the various social groups into which I am born. I learn about what it means to be human from the very activity of being human. But to be human always means to be with other people [. . .] For the most part, unfortunately, the self-interpretation offered to us by others is misguided. We understand ourselves all too often, not as openness, but as things — egos in need of gratification and security. This inauthentic self-understanding arises because we are unable to bear the truth about what it means to be human—that we are finite and mortal Being-in-the-world.<sup>87</sup>

We have seen how Kavanagh railed against any interpretation of the self as mere 'ego' and it is also clear that in McGahern's fiction the reaction is so often against characters or individuals who place their own selfish motives and desires before those of others - Reagan's ill treatment of Elizabeth in *The Barracks* being one such example. Heidegger's definition of self creates a most interesting question for a writer like McGahern because his philosophy challenges the Platonic view of self as the eternal soul of the person. Instead Heidegger argues in favour of a view that the self is 'never fixed and always open for change', that in fact the nature of the soul is not a matter for philosophy, it relates to faith alone.<sup>88</sup> This notion of uncertainty in the world influenced Jean Francois Lyotard's concept of the 'Postmodern condition'

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<sup>86</sup> Selected from Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Part Three, cited in Michael E. Zimmerman's, *Eclipse of the Self: The Development of Heidegger's Concept of Authenticity* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), p. 27

<sup>87</sup> Michael E. Zimmerman, *Eclipse of the Self*, p. 30.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Zimmerman, *Eclipse of the Self*, p. 24.

and Michel Foucault's feelings about the effects of power and knowledge on the individual in a context where there is no fixed idea about anything and where narratives become virtually incredulous. In this unstable intellectual climate, Edward Said tells us that 'The self was therefore to be studied, cultivated and, if necessary, refashioned and constituted. In both Lyotard and Foucault we find precisely the same trope employed to explain the disappointment in the politics of liberation: narrative [. . .] is no longer adequate for plotting the human trajectory in society'.<sup>89</sup>

How these theories are significant for a writer like McGahern is that many of his characters recognise the general confusion concerning their identity or selfhood, and although the author is himself careful to separate the nature of one's faith and one's morals, there is at the heart of his search a deep respect for Kavanagh's emphasis on the soul. McGahern records these opinions both in conversation and in writing, questioning what essentially constitutes his community and the 'literature' associated with it, declaring in one such article:

For me and the few friends I had in the Dublin of the time there was no such thing as a Catholic literature – or even Irish literature. In fact we were inclined to avoid the word 'literature' like the plague. There were just books that were well written, that cast light and gave pleasure and solace. Even in the literary circles of the time, there was a kind of didactic judgemental violence that I link with a censorship mentality. Surely the good manners of the mind require us to put aside a book we do not like with regret, not with venom. We could appreciate Kavanagh's

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<sup>89</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 29.

Posterity has no use  
For anything but the soul,  
The lines that speak the passionate heart,  
The spirit that lives alone.<sup>90</sup>

For McGahern, art quintessentially 'depends on the expression and the personality of the writer'.<sup>91</sup> He reinforces Kavanagh's desire to separate the inner 'spirit' of the poet from the nationalistic or patriotic sentiments of the state, in that Wildean sense that books are either well written or badly written. This creates some difficulty for any argument that would appear to present the existence of 'Irishness' or 'Irish literature' or an 'Irish self' as such, because clearly in the mind of McGahern, art must simply focus on the inner core of one's being; it must not be concerned with the nature of the political world. But there is another way of interpreting the world of 'art' or 'literature', a point of view advocated during McGahern's own life-time, when this form of 'censorship' was taking place, not just in Ireland, but also in Britain and on the European continent. The opinion was expressed by George Orwell in a well-known article entitled 'Why I Write', first published in the summer edition of *Gangrel* magazine in 1946, in which the author asserts: 'no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do

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<sup>90</sup> McGahern, 'Censorship', *Love of the World*, p. 98. The other occasion in which he mentions Kavanagh's views on this subject is during his interview with Eamon Maher in August 2002 (see footnote below).

<sup>91</sup> Here McGahern mentions the poet's views on the soul: 'Kavanagh said: "Posterity has no time for anything but the soul", Celine says: "invoking posterity is like making speeches to maggots." This statement, while savage, is as spiritual in its own way as Kavanagh's. They're both true though they state the opposite', *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal*, pp. 155-156.

with politics is in itself a political attitude'.<sup>92</sup> Orwell's understanding of the abusive effects of totalitarian rule were rooted in his experiences of the Spanish Civil War, and his personal memories of the period were chronicled in that 'frankly political book' *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), which explores his account of the conflict and the changing political circumstances of the time. It was only later, in the writing of *Animal Farm*, that he felt he had successfully fused 'political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole', with his battle against totalitarianism in favour of democratic socialism.<sup>93</sup>

Orwell's life and career is only one example where individual experience, within a particular country and at a given period of time, appears to shape the aesthetic and political point of a view of a writer. There are countless other instances: Kate O'Brien's experiences of living in the Spanish Basque country in the 1920s certainly encouraged her later interest in the politics of the Spanish Civil War. It may also have influenced liberal attitudes to her outlook as a woman, drawing her towards the demand for greater gender equality and sexuality, and these feelings are likely to have heightened her criticism of the clerical authorities in Ireland. The perspectives of many female writers caught up in a male-dominated world has greatly influenced a way of expressing the self which somehow reinvents the structures of the society they inhabit, and subsequently questions or challenges this

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<sup>92</sup> George Orwell, 'Why I Write', cited in *George Orwell Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

existence through fiction. George Eliot defined this process, almost a century before O'Brien, when she wrote in one of her essays:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies [. . .] Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People.<sup>94</sup>

This view of art as leaping beyond 'the bounds' of the personal self and becoming a greater dialogue with community was prevalent in early Victorian fiction: it was not native to a particular person or place. George Eliot, pen name of Mary Ann Evans, used a mask to disguise her identity as a woman through the persona of a male novelist. Through this artistic invention, she successfully published and ironically painted 'the life of the People' in her society. She could not feel satisfied to live like other women, strictly in subservience to a husband or institution and so she abandoned her faith, eloped with a married man and vehemently acted as she believed was true to her own nature, in constant conflict with the norms of her society.

When we consider the lives of various writers from different backgrounds, we recognise that 'the self' is a concept not easily defined by the individual personality alone because of interconnecting personal, historical or political influences. The most concrete definition of this term, certainly in relation to the Irish writers in this study,

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<sup>94</sup> George Eliot, From 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review*, July 1856.

relates mainly to the core principles shared by the artists themselves, the sense that they are defined by a set of common values which cannot ever be compromised. But this particular understanding of the self is often defined in connection with the people or institutions surrounding the writer because the artist is always reacting against a particular community in order to ensure that these shared principles or values are recognised, or at least understood. Even in McGahern's novel *The Pornographer* (1979), where the narrator appears nameless and apparently estranged from others, except through the intimacies of sex or the fact that he is attached to his aunt, we find our protagonist searching for meaning to his life in 'the crowded solitude'.<sup>95</sup> He ponders 'the nothing that we always learn when we sink to learn something of ourselves or life from a poor other', longing for that desire to 'go inland, in the solitude that is both pain and joy, and there make our own truth'.<sup>96</sup> The author may lay claim to the fact that the place is not always as important as the person, as far as art is concerned, but he admits that this sense of belief in the writer's 'complete freedom, within the limitations of language and talent' is exactly what led him into trouble with the 'authorities' in the first place, specifically over the banning of *The Dark*.<sup>97</sup> He describes this experience as 'something unpleasant, something alien, for all that mattered to us was whether the work was any good or not'.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 62

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>97</sup> McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', p. 93.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

It appears, like both Orwell and Kavanagh before him, that McGahern learned a valuable lesson from the censorship of his writing, a particular understanding that the view of art from the perspective of the writer is not as it seems to the people and society which surrounds him.<sup>99</sup> There is always a feeling that he is battling against the forces of his time, and that he longs to assert that 'complete freedom' he talks about, which is somehow buried deep and centrally within himself. In a novel like *The Pornographer*, there is also realisation of the novelist trying at best to take control of the narrative and speaking to the reader, expressing his own views about the nature of his writing, even so far as questioning the philosophical implications of the soul:

I am tired and flushed as I get up from the typewriter. Nothing ever holds together unless it is mixed with some of one's own blood. I am not able to read what I've written [. . .] Is my flush the flesh of others, are my words to be their worlds? And what then of the soul, set on its blind solitary course among the stars, the heart that leaps up to suffer, the mind that thinks itself free and knows that it is not—in this doomed marriage with the body whose one instinct is to survive and plunder and arrogantly reproduce itself along the way?<sup>100</sup>

In this quotation there is that familiar feeling of a Yeatsian dialogue at work: some form of debate between the body and the soul. The narrator is not McGahern, he is an invented character; and yet we are inclined to consider such passages as the expression of the writer's own innermost feelings and preoccupations, his attempts

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<sup>99</sup> "'The way we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived are often very different'", Rutledge said', McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>100</sup> *The Pornographer*, p. 24.



to understand the connections between self and other, the battle within himself ('the mind that thinks itself free and knows it is not'), and the judgements that people make of his fiction or of our own way of seeing ourselves through it: 'impatient for the jostle of the bar, the cigarette smoke, the shouted orders'.<sup>101</sup> In the paragraph which follows this particular statement, the narrator reflects: 'I check myself in the mirror', where we find again that preoccupation with the image and the desire to in some way reflect the personality of the author, something which Joyce establishes in relation to art and characterisation, both in *Dubliners* and in *Ulysses*.<sup>102</sup>

McGahern certainly comes to question the stability of his own faith and identity throughout his writing and it may follow that one reason why writers like him are driven to fiction as a vocation is because they feel that within their own private space they are essentially separated or alienated from the world, with no real sense of fixed identity or values.<sup>103</sup> Since Heidegger's being in the world is somehow necessary for understanding ourselves, the writer is subconsciously aware of this contradiction. By seeking to understand 'the self' within, he must therefore react against his own alienated estrangement from community, something which Patrick

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<sup>101</sup> McGahern, *The Pornographer*, p. 24.

<sup>102</sup> This is revealed during Gabriel Conroy's moment of epiphany in 'The Dead': 'the face that always puzzled him when he saw it in the mirror', *Dubliners* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 219. A similar image is present in Stephen Dedalus' consciousness when he refers to 'The cracked looking glass of a servant' as an essential 'symbol of Irish art', *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>103</sup> McGahern admits 'having lost my formal faith' in a letter to Michael McLaverty on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1961, cited in ed. John Killen, *Dear Mr McLaverty: The Literary Correspondence of John McGahern and Michael McLaverty 1959-1980* (Belfast: The Linen Hall Library, 2006), p. 24.

Sheeran fundamentally associates with the fiction of O'Flaherty.<sup>104</sup> Jürgen Kamm suggests that McGahern's characters, 'once face to face with the realization of loss and emptiness, attempt to overcome [. . .] futility by imposing new meanings on their existence', which explains why at the end of novels like *The Leavetaking* the protagonist looks to the future with a sense of hope and renewal, pondering 'neither a return nor a departure but a continuing', and looking forward to creating 'our separate selves, and each day we will renew it again and again and again'.<sup>105</sup> Prior to this moment, Patrick Moran battles with Father Curry's decision to dismiss him from his teaching position for marrying a foreign divorcee. Moran's refusal to resign represents the author's private quarrel with Church interference, where the struggle is felt both internally and externally: 'I was met by tension everywhere I went, on the concrete, in the lunchroom, but nothing was spoken in my presence'.<sup>106</sup>

The art form for McGahern inevitably becomes, whether intentionally or not, the mode through which he can overcome his personal struggles, a feeling which is born 'out of' that Yeatsian 'quarrel with others'. Frank Shovlin contends, for example, that McGahern is especially influenced by Yeats' poem 'Ego Dominus Tuus', one of the possible sources for the novelist's interest in the term 'love of the world', the title of one of his late short stories.<sup>107</sup> In Yeats' poem, we recognise how

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<sup>104</sup> 'Alienation is a major theme of O'Flaherty's fiction [. . .] any education other than in the traditional skills of farming and fishing could only set him at a remove from his own people', Patrick Sheeran, *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty: A Study in Romantic Realism* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1976), p. 63.

<sup>105</sup> Jürgen Kamm, 'John McGahern', *Contemporary Irish Novelists* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990), p. 176; McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, p. 168.

<sup>106</sup> McGahern, *The Leavetaking*, p. 162.

<sup>107</sup> Frank Shovlin, 'Ego Dominus Tuus and John McGahern', Yeats Summer School, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

the life of action is contemplated through the common dialogue of the anti-self: the voice of Hic being representative of the outer man who grows 'rich, popular and full of influence', and the voice of Ille, embodying the life of contemplation or the art of the mind. As in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul', Yeats tries to 'Measure' events 'in action or in thought', although in the latter poem he appears to give more powerful expression to the bodily self. It is the general philosophical questioning of the flesh and spirit and the particular recognition in 'Sailing to Byzantium' that the 'aged man is but a paltry thing [. . .] unless / Soul clap its hands and sing', which is most apparent in Yeats' late poetry, no doubt inspiring writers like McGahern to discover deeper meaning in the inner psychological life.<sup>108</sup> It is no coincidence that the same philosophy was advocated by Kavanagh, who did not hesitate to condemn the outward show of the public man in remarks such as: 'It would be interesting to see what would happen to a high-court judge if he were forced to follow the true poetic formula, doing the job for love, being forced into pubs for relief. He would at least learn something about human nature'.<sup>109</sup>

Kavanagh's criticism delivers a message about the 'spiritual' nature of art, that it is a kind of 'faith' in oneself or the reality of one's soul and inner world that is somehow 'true', and which really matters in the end. McGahern shares the sentiment, and one could argue that his fiction actually takes us to the point where it

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<sup>108</sup> Yeats, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul', p. 123; 'Sailing to Byzantium', p. 95, W. B. Yeats, *The Major Works*.

<sup>109</sup> Kavanagh, 'Autobiography' *November Haggard: Uncollected Prose and Verse of Patrick Kavanagh* (New York, The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1971), p. 2.

appears that the self, or at least reliance on a private inner quality, is really the only hope for survival and 'spiritual' triumph in the world that we know. He also acknowledges the significance of the poetic instinct and philosophical interpretations about human nature, when he writes: 'I remember David Hume's stricture on the uselessness of arguing about religion because its base is faith not reason. The same is true of art. Most good writing, and all great writing, has a spiritual quality that we can recognise but never quite define.'<sup>110</sup> This would suggest that, like Kavanagh, the author opts for a view of art that 'recognises', at least instinctively, that the self is the essential spirit of the personality, and at the 'heart's core' of all great writing.

### **The Enlightened Self: the battle between faith and authority**

Kavanagh's belief that the poet lives within a kind of 'fog of unknowing' where 'consciousness is despair' is worth considering in the context of McGahern's fiction and personality, since he, too, describes 'waking' from a book, from an unconscious slumber where time is somehow lost or transcended. As explored in Chapter 3, the problem with the nature of the self as something real or deeply spiritual was not confined to an Irish setting and had preoccupied writers and philosophers since Plato and Aristotle. We earlier discussed how the influence of Augustine and the philosophy of Aquinas occupied an important role in Church teaching (at least within the educational curriculum in modern Ireland), where the influences are clearly present in the writings of Joyce and Kavanagh. The roots of a more conscious

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<sup>110</sup> John McGahern, 'Playing with Words', *Love of the Word*, p. 9.

understanding of modern selfhood can be found in the Enlightenment period, where 'reason' helped to challenge traditional notions of faith and authority, and when the whole structure of the relationship between the individual and the state was put on the public stage, with debates raging into the late eighteenth century between figures like Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and Tom Paine in the *Rights of Man* (1791). Such philosophers had a profound effect not only on modern social structures, but also directly influenced events in Irish history and society.<sup>111</sup>

John Locke was the first philosopher to define explicitly the 'Self' as 'that conscious thinking thing, whatever substance made up of (whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not), which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness and misery [. . .] which makes the same person, and constitutes this inseparable self'.<sup>112</sup> What is interesting about Locke's philosophy is the dependency on reason, memory or 'consciousness' in defining 'personal identity' (the nature of the self) and 'the presence of a psychological relationship – remembering - that binds together earlier and later stages of a person'.<sup>113</sup> This 'conscious' process is central to McGahern's fiction, mainly in the way that the writer uses characters to revisit experiences in the past or to rationalise

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<sup>111</sup> Consider the views of the United Irishmen in a wider context of universal selfhood and liberty, the way in which they were influenced by the events of the American and French Revolutions; that sense of the injustice of the Penal Laws (which Burke outlined) or a greater demand for human rights and equality expressed by Paine.

<sup>112</sup> John Locke, from 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1694), Book II, Chapter XXVII: 'Of Identity and Diversity', cited in ed. Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *Personal Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), p. 32.

<sup>113</sup> Raymond Martin and John Barresi, 'Introduction', *Personal Identity*, p. 38.

about his growing scepticism towards organised religion and the authoritarian 'theocracy' which surrounds him.<sup>114</sup> The more positive theological influences on his mind are revealed during an interview in March 1992, when he describes his fascination 'with the passage on memory in St. Augustine's *Confessions*', suggesting that it is not possible to create an 'image [in art]' without memory.<sup>115</sup> The passage to which the author refers can be found in Book X of the *Confessions*, and begins with the following reflection by Augustine:

And so I come to the fields and vast palaces of memory, where are stored the innumerable images of material things brought to it by the senses [. . .] When I turn to memory, I ask to bring forth what I want: and some things are produced immediately, some take longer as if they had to be brought out from some more secret place of storage; some pour out in a heap, and while we are actually wanting and looking for something different, they hurl themselves upon us [. . .] I brush them from the face of my memory with the hand of my heart, until at last the thing I want is brought to light as from some hidden place.<sup>116</sup>

This passage is comparable to McGahern's impression of 'the Image' which he claims 'stays in the mind and will not go away until it is written down' or that

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<sup>114</sup> Although McGahern's Catholic upbringing is an important influence in his life, his recognition of 'David Hume's stricture' is also significant because it is based on an Enlightenment view of reason over faith and reduces Locke's view of self to a mere illusion or 'bundle' of abstract emotions.

<sup>115</sup> McGahern's interview with James Whyte on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1992, where he states: 'Before I read Proust I was fascinated with the passage on memory in St Augustine's *Confessions*. I don't think you can have the image without memory. Out of memory comes the image, and the image is the language of the imagination', cited in *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*, p. 231. McGahern also mentions the influence of Augustine's passage on memory in 'The Bird Swift', *Love of the World*, p. 74

<sup>116</sup> *The Confessions of St Augustine* (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1944), Book Ten, XIII, p. 172.

process of 'waking' out of a 'hidden' or 'private world'.<sup>117</sup> For Augustine, 'the Image' is mentioned in various instances as something 'present in [his] memory', associated with 'principles', 'feelings', 'words', or as a great source of 'power' and inspiration, encouraging the individual to ask questions about his existence ('What then am I, O God? What nature am I?'), to consider the world 'outside' or 'within' himself. For Augustine the answer is 'all inside me [. . .] and in my memory too I meet myself—I recall myself, what I have done, when and where and in what state of mind I was when I did it', so that we are all 'powerfully various and manifold and immeasurable'.<sup>118</sup> He also believes that 'memory' is 'a faculty of [the] soul and belongs to [. . .] nature', that 'the mind and the memory are not two separate things' and become 'a profound and immeasurable multiplicity' of images which seem to drown out the darkness 'even while man lives under sentence of death here'.<sup>119</sup> The relationship between memory and emotions of 'desire, joy, fear and sadness' are all present in the *Confessions*, and influence McGahern's view that art is 'a way of seeing' beyond the 'darkness'.<sup>120</sup> Based on the religious nature of the author's upbringing and his reading of theologians like Augustine, it is likely that he is influenced as much by Christian theology as he is by secular philosophy.

In a later interview in August 2002 McGahern reiterated the same preoccupation with Augustine, arguing that one of his 'favourite definitions of art is

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<sup>117</sup> In order of quotations: 'Playing with Words' (p.9), 'The Solitary Reader' (p.90), and 'The Image' (p.7), John McGahern, *Love of the Word Essays*.

<sup>118</sup> All quotations can be found in A. F. Sheed's translation of *The Confessions of St Augustine*, Book Ten, XIII, pp. 172-181.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 174-181.

<sup>120</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir*, p. 36.

that it abolishes time and establishes memory and, if you reflect on it, you couldn't have the image without memory. The image is at the base of the imagination and it's the basic language of writing'.<sup>121</sup> In this way, his novels appear as a series of pictures in the mind, shifting between the past and the present in efforts to arrive at a more conscious understanding of self and identity. Only art itself can erase the memory of the transience of life, defined by the ticking of the clocks throughout the fiction:

Time was only for the living. She wanted time, as much time as she could get [. . .]How much time had gone? Nine or was it seven or was it ten heartbeats [. . .]The shopping was all done, the day almost ended, the lights burning ghostly on the white gravel [. . .] Time should have stopped with the clock but instead it moved in a glazed dream of tiredness without their ticking insistence [. . .] The only thing that remained on the body was a large silver digital watch, the red numerals pulsing out the seconds like a mechanical heart eerily alive in the stillness.<sup>122</sup>

The recurring patterns of emphasis on time and the associations with the passing of the living are prevalent in McGahern's thoughts. The fact that the last reference (above) appears after the death of the character Jonny in *That They May Face The Rising Sun* (his final novel), reinforces the inevitability of death for McGahern, which he believed was imminent during the writing of the novel. It becomes an acceptance or recognition, like Beckett, that when we are born, we are all destined to die. Could it be that this revelation of the self is, in fact, the realisation

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<sup>121</sup> Selected from 'Interview with John McGahern', Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal*, p. 146. McGahern borrows this definition of art from D. J. Gordon, see *W. B. Yeats: Images of a Poet*, ed. D. J. Gordon et al (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), p. 43.

<sup>122</sup> In order of novels by publication: McGahern, *The Barracks*, pp. 72-122; *The Leavetaking*, p. 62; *Amongst Women* p. 181; *That They May Face The Rising Sun*, p. 287.



and inevitability of death? The work of art 'establishes' for the novelist a certainty about the memory of his existence, a striving for eternity, emulating Yeats' preoccupation with capturing the particular moment ('Bid me strike a match and blow') and finally accepting that 'The innocent and the beautiful / Have no enemy but time'.<sup>123</sup>

Joyce's early fiction is concerned with this same problem, evident in Duffy's epiphany on the death of Mrs Sinico, when we are told: 'he realised that she was dead, that she had ceased to exist, that she had become a memory'.<sup>124</sup> We then learn that the character is 'ill at ease' and begins to reflect seriously on the events of his past and what this means for his life in the present and that his own world is drawing to a close. Joyce repeats the word 'memory' at least three times in the course of Duffy's premonition. The terrifying prospect of him 'ceasing to exist' is brought home when the reader suddenly realises that the character is 'alone' and that he, too, will die and become 'a memory – if anyone' cares to remember him.<sup>125</sup> This is a theme which Brian Friel returns to in *Philadelphia, Here I Come* (1964), dramatising Gar Private's nostalgia for Ballybeg as 'precious, precious gold'.<sup>126</sup> Preserving and establishing memory through the medium of art is also recognisable in the opening moments of McGahern's first published novel, evident in the thought processes of Elizabeth Reegan:

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<sup>123</sup> Yeats, 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz', *The Major Works*, p. 121.

<sup>124</sup> James Joyce, 'A Painful Case', *Dubliners*, p. 112.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>126</sup> Brian Friel, *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, cited in ed. Seamus Deane, *Brian Friel: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 77.

‘You never give a thought for anybody’, spun angrily over in her mind but she did not speak it. She feared she still loved him, and he seemed to care hardly at all [. . .] She watched him pull the jumper she had leaving the collar unclasped at the throat, the silver buckle of the belt swinging loosely on its black catches. It was more than four years since she first met him, when she was at home on convalescence from the London Hospital, worn out after nursing through the Blitz.<sup>127</sup>

This is just one passage amongst many in the author’s fiction which demonstrates how characters tend to make sense of their lives through memory and connections with others. Notice the attention to detail and how the image of ‘the silver buckle of the belt swinging’ seems to capture the conscious moment in time, almost like a moving pendulum, whilst somehow transporting the image back through the memories of the mind. This theme is a constant in McGahern’s art, most noticeably in his final novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002).

The awareness of time and the inevitably of change permeate McGahern’s novels, ensuring that there is apparent within the author’s consciousness a determination to break free from traditional structures of power and authority. Since he longs to escape the constraints of time through the permanence of art, the fiction creates a more enlightened or autonomous state of mind where, in the Kantian sense, the writer may have some liberty to reflect both on ‘the starry heavens above’ and the ‘moral law within’ him.<sup>128</sup> He believes, for example, that the individual’s

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<sup>127</sup> McGahern, *The Barracks*, p. 13.

<sup>128</sup> Paraphrase of Kant’s conclusion in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788): ‘Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe the more often and more enduringly reflection is occupied with them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me’, cited in ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 1.

understanding of 'morality' should be separated from state or church authority.<sup>129</sup> It seems fair to say that McGahern is uncomfortable with any notion of a society run strictly on religious or theological grounds, mainly because of what it does to the individual and the family unit it controls. He is also conscious of what happens when the roles are reversed and people lose all sense of the 'good' in the values that they once cherished.<sup>130</sup> There is consequently a moral or ethical purpose to McGahern's fiction, a desire to resolve inner tensions, and he expresses these opinions in various critical essays, one entitled 'God and Me', which begins:

I grew up in what was a theocracy in all but name. Hell and heaven and purgatory were places real and certain we would go after death, dependent on Judgement. Churches in my part of Ireland were so crowded that children and old people who were fasting to receive Communion would regularly pass out in the bad air and have to be carried outside. Not to attend Sunday Mass was to court social ostracism, to be seen as mad or consorting with the devil, or at best, to be seriously eccentric.<sup>131</sup>

It may seem surprising to claim, in the context of this 'theocracy', that McGahern's critical mind is by no means against the teachings of the Church. It is worth noting that in the same essay the author mentions (in a passage from a letter by Proust dated 1903) the changing 'anticlerical' times and the 'spiritualised beauty of the church spire [. . .] somewhat better, nobler, more dignified' than the buildings which

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<sup>129</sup> McGahern alludes to the fact that 'morals' and 'religion' need to remain 'completely separate' because the first is concerned with relationships and the other is 'all that surrounds our life', cited in his interview with Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal*, p. 155.

<sup>130</sup> McGahern describes this feeling in various interviews, for example in the conversation with Eamon Maher, where he talks about how 'a new injustice may be replacing the old', Maher, *The Church and its Spire*, p. 20.

<sup>131</sup> McGahern, 'God and Me', *Love of the World*, p. 149.

surround it.<sup>132</sup> The point McGahern is making is that 'When a long abuse of power is corrected, it is generally replaced by an opposite violence. In the new dispensations, all that was good in what went before is tarred indiscriminately with the bad'.<sup>133</sup> The author cannot accept any form of authoritarian 'intolerance', whether it is implemented by church, state or the individual character, simply because it undermines his inner sense of peace and harmony or because it leads to the extremes in human nature, by failing to ensure the stability of a reasoned mind. What he admires most about Church history and influence is that it instilled the same 'manners of the mind' he discovered in the solitary pursuit of reading and writing, that 'introduction to ceremony, to grace and sacrament', which connects both art with the spiritual or religious life. He understands that the 'religious instinct is ingrained in human nature', that it is born 'out of man's relationship to his total environment', where 'morals' derive from his connection with 'his fellow men'.<sup>134</sup> There is a sense even throughout his writing that he misses the 'pleasure' associated with these moments and of being part of the ceremonies of church life, when he reflects: 'The movement of focus from the home and the school to the church brought with it a certain lightness, a lifting of oppression, a going outwards, even a joy [. . .] That is all that now remains. Belief as such has long since gone'.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Selected from McGahern's essay 'God and Me', where he quotes directly from E. R. Dodd's work *The Greeks and the Irrational, Love of the World*, p. 151.

<sup>135</sup> McGahern, 'The Church and its Spire', *Love of the World*, pp. 133-137.

McGahern is careful not to equate the religious and artistic life too closely. He views literature as a 'luxury' and 'a great tribute to life' but to call art 'religious' is too strong a word for him and he admits that the real feeling is purely 'spiritual'.<sup>136</sup> Though he appears to have lost his faith in a traditional God, he can still be part of the memory of that belief, which now exists permanently in his mind. He is also wary, like Kavanagh, of any argument which promotes denial in the certainty of self or the spiritual experience. He therefore recognises the need for religion because he feels it is 'necessary if life is to retain value'.<sup>137</sup> His novels appear to demonstrate that the individual has a certain 'private' inner life and that it is only through the work of art that we can reach the truth about self and community, as he suggests about his own writing, when he says that 'through words I could experience my own life with more reality than ordinary living'.<sup>138</sup> He views fiction as a way of creating space to probe deeply into the realities of his world. This is the central 'Image' that exists within the mind of the artist, so that he is always reflecting that 'Art, out of the failure of love, [is] an attempt to create a world in which we can live'.<sup>139</sup> The focus is on overcoming the burden of failure, of finding resolution to the quarrel between self and others. He supports this 'vision' of art as a 'reality', celebrating 'that still and

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<sup>136</sup> 'An Interview with John McGahern', James Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*, p. 230. The connection with Kavanagh is brought evermore closer when we think of the poet's comments on poetry as 'a luxury trade' or as 'super-luxury', 'Autobiography', *November Haggard: Uncollected Prose and Verse of Patrick Kavanagh*, p.2. In 'Censorship', McGahern claims the inspiration came from Flaubert: 'I work in the luxury trade', was Flaubert's phrase', *Love of the World: Essays*, p. 97.

<sup>137</sup> James Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*, p. 230.

<sup>138</sup> McGahern, 'Playing with Words', *Love of the World: Essays*, p. 9.

<sup>139</sup> John McGahern, 'The Image: Prologue to a reading at the Rockefeller University [1968]', *Love of the Word Essays*, p. 5.

private world that each of us possess and others cannot see', where the 'rhythm' is 'little more than the instinctive movement of the vision as it comes to life and begins its search'.<sup>140</sup>

But search for what exactly?

### **The private inner man and the outward show**

In McGahern's fiction the private, inner life is paramount and at heart worthy of admiration in the face of the outward show of the exhibitionist. The battle for kindness, compassion and the inner life of contemplation are shown to triumph over the absurdity or bravado of patriarchal figures motivated by power and authority. It is only by observing the flaw in certain characters that we recognise the inner strength in others. Moran in *Amongst Women* fits this former category, as could be said of John Quinn in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, with that added desire for materialism and sexual gratification. The quiet, placid, more philosophical heroines like Elizabeth Reegan are at the mercy of the brutality of their loved ones or the coldness of community, as is the young Mahoney. In the case of Joe and Kate Rutledge, with the intimacy of their trust and confidence, flawed characters seem to be magnetically drawn to their door in search of guidance, possibly even personal absolution. The men of the world, steeped in practical or financial success, often call on the Rutledges to resolve their anxieties or to receive their approval on things, as we learn from the appearance of the character John Quinn:

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

All through the brief visit he [John Quinn] remained standing but his eyes were restless about the room and only paused when he looked at Kate [. . .] 'The Lord God has said, 'Tis not good for man to live alone, and John Quinn always took this to heart,' he continued smoothly [. . .]'Young people sometimes find it hard to understand that older people need the same things and comforts and enjoyments that they need.'[. . .] 'Happiness makes happiness. When people are happy they help one another and get on well together.'<sup>141</sup>

The most striking aspect of Quinn's speech is that most of what he says here can be taken as philosophically sound: everyone in life is in search of 'happiness', whether it is in terms of financial success (outward glory) or emotional stimulus (inner strength). The irony is that the reader knows Quinn is merely regurgitating proverbial clichés, motivated solely by his own self-interests and physical gratification, as he insinuates (through the narrator's voice) a few minutes after expressing these views: 'too much politeness was sometimes a big hold-up to people's business in this world'.<sup>142</sup> We know that McGahern believes 'self-expression' can be damaging to art because it requires the polishing of that 'circuitous artifice' and perhaps he feels that people are somehow motivated in similar ways, disguising or hiding their true thoughts and feelings in order to survive or make financial progress in the world. Foremost, there is Quinn's own personal nature to consider. He is only interested in satisfying physical or material needs and lacks the quiet life which both Joe and Kate sense and embrace within

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<sup>141</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, p. 140.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

themselves. They meditate on this hidden peace instinctively at Christmas time: 'The days were quiet. They did not feel particularly quiet or happy but through them ran the sense, like an underground river, that there would come a time when these days would be looked back on as happiness, all that life could give of contentment and peace'.<sup>143</sup> Joe successfully predicts that Quinn may well 'meet his match' in his new wife, suggesting that mistreatment of people will not go unnoticed, or will inevitably catch up with the cynical perpetrator. The Ruttledges are the philosophical reasoners of the novel: they watch from a distance, observing the people around them with great care and consideration, sharing their ideas with each other and often thinking inwardly, as Joe contemplates in conversation with Patrick Ryan: 'What do we have without life? What does love become but care?' <sup>144</sup> Ruttledge's strength of character also emerges in his compassion and sensitivity to others. He is careful to correct the bluntness in Ryan's insistence that the truth must be spoken regardless of what it does to others. What is even more important to him than the 'truth' is 'kindness . . . understanding . . . sympathy maybe', the inherent values represented by McGahern's mother.<sup>145</sup>

Most of the characters in the novel share a deep quarrel between an inner self and the demands of practical success within community. Joe's uncle, the Shah, is the embodiment of this struggle, at times openly battling with the need to overcome anxieties about his place in the world, and revealing these concerns: 'I know full

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>144</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, p. 216.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 79.



well. Too many hang on till they're staggering round the place. There's a time for everything'.<sup>146</sup> The Shah's material wealth cannot ever compensate for the restlessness and emptiness that he senses within himself because his life is consumed by 'the sale and transfer' of his business.<sup>147</sup> He seeks Ruttledge's advice on numerous occasions, for example in organising the 'transfer' to his long-time partner Frank Dolan, with whom he is barely on speaking terms. We are told that the Shah could never express to Dolan his true feelings on the matter so he must rely on Ruttledge as a go-between: 'All the time he had wanted Frank Dolan to have the place but it had remained hidden because of the fear that he might be seen as unmanly or unbusinesslike or even perhaps going outside the family'.<sup>148</sup> Frank is likewise unable to find a release for his anxieties without fear of financial ruin or the possibility of not being in control of his own decisions and so cannot bend to the simple agreements set down in the bank official's loan. We are told that all he 'had done was to be too honest and too self-expressive. Each quality alone was dangerous enough: combined together they were a recipe for disaster'.<sup>149</sup>

It appears that McGahern is once again in favour of speaking his own mind about the way in which the individual (or writer) expresses his nature and it is through Joe Ruttledge's character that this message is generally conveyed. This is evident when Patrick Ryan questions him on the nature of happiness, beginning:

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

‘Are you happy, lad? He demanded.  
 Ruttledge had added turf briquettes to the fire and was  
 looking silently into the flames.  
 ‘I’m not unhappy,’ he answered, surprised.  
 ‘What does that mean?’  
 ‘I’m not over the moon. I have health, for the time being,  
 enough money, no immediate worries. That, I believe, is  
 about as good as it gets. Are *you* happy?’  
 ‘I am in fuck. There are times I don’t know who I am from  
 one minute to the next. That’s why I always liked the acting. You  
 You are someone else and always know what you are doing  
 and why.’<sup>150</sup>

In this terrain universal concerns are as relevant as local matters. Ruttledge does not have the definitive answers to Patrick’s question, but he is willing to recognise that happiness can only be defined by the momentary existence: it is never fixed because of the changing nature of our moods and feelings, which are directly associated with the world around us. Although he is just as confused about life as the other characters appear to be, Ruttledge is quick to point out that often ‘we can’t see what’s under our noses [. . .] it seems we can never know ourselves’.<sup>151</sup> Despite this degree of uncertainty, he is more in touch with the self at the centre of his personality than any other character, whereas Ryan’s confusion over his own identity essentially persists because he lacks what his friend possesses.

The issue of identity and the changing circumstances associated with life, pre-eminently time and nature, are continuous throughout the novel because everything

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

is interconnected and appears in a state of flux: 'The lake was an enormous mirror turned to the depth of the sky [. . .] The reeds had lost their brightness and were leaning towards the water. Everything that had flowed had now come to fruit'.<sup>152</sup> This is reinforced by the inevitability of time passing or by what happens in the lives of the people on the lake, the changes which take place from season to season, from Quinn's marriage right through to the death of Johnny. Nothing is certain except what is felt within: the various feelings and sensations which make life and happiness possible.

The purpose of Rutledge's conversation with Patrick Ryan is to draw attention to the general uncertainty about selfhood which appears to define our modern identity on a universal scale, and these are recurring themes throughout the novel, for example when Kate suggests that our whole lives can be 'changed by a single meeting', and her husband replies: 'Now you are in the middle of that life', a phrase possibly influenced by McGahern's reading of Dante, evidence that he is returning to the artist's preoccupation with universal themes, similarly explored in 'Ego Dominus Tuus'.<sup>153</sup>

Ryan's response to Joe on the nature of happiness also draws parallels with Yeats' idea of the 'anti-self', of play-acting or using masks (opposites) to in some way control who and what we are or to resolve the complexities of personal identity and

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<sup>152</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, p. 186.

<sup>153</sup> Here Rutledge is echoing the opening lines of Dante's 'The Divine Comedy' (completed in 1320) which reads: 'Along the journey of our life half way, / I found myself again in a dark wood', trans. Peter Dale, 'The Divine Comedy' (London: Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 1996), 'Hell', Canto 1.

tease out the intimacies of human nature. This conversation alone tends to prove that McGahern's last novel, more than any other, is an attempt to come to terms with the nature of the self, of knowing or questioning what it is exactly that we are all seeking in life. The answers may be found in embracing the happiness of the moment, of blotting out the material needs and concerns of our egotistical natures, confirmed in perhaps the most significant passage in the novel, when Ruttledge overhears a conversation between Kate and the Shah:

As he listened to the two voices he was so attached to and thought back to the afternoon, the striking of the clocks, the easy pleasant company, the walk round the shore, with a rush of feeling he felt that this must be happiness. As soon as the thought came to him, he fought it back, blaming the whiskey. The very idea was as dangerous as presumptive speech: happiness could not be sought or worried into being, or even fully grasped; it should be allowed its own slow pace so that it passes unnoticed, if ever it comes at all.<sup>154</sup>

This is surely the moral and critical heart of the novel: a reminder that the 'clocks' are ticking and we are losing precious moments of our lives through an obsession with material needs and physical demands. Happiness can be found mainly in feeling, in embracing and cherishing every minute, not in meaningless self-gratification, demonstrated in the novel when the Shah's money is carefully counted out in the bedroom.<sup>155</sup> Here we discover that the man is sombre and withdrawn, eating in silence, and that 'There was no time to walk the fields. The

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<sup>154</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, p. 192.

<sup>155</sup> Patrick Kavanagh embraced this fact, stating in 'Autobiographical Prose' on Oct 16<sup>th</sup> 1963: 'Happiness is continuity, growth, and once that chain is broken, disaster follows'.

time had disappeared in the slow counting'.<sup>156</sup> In a televised interview shortly before his death, McGahern described the Shah as based on the character of his own Uncle, a man equally consumed by self-importance. The author also talked about pleasurable walks in the countryside, when he felt the presence of his mother walking with him 'consciously or unconsciously'.<sup>157</sup> These experiences gave the writer the inspiration 'to dramatize that private world', to make sense of the fact that 'all we have are the precious moments and the hours and the days'.<sup>158</sup> *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is a way of presenting this life of people within an Irish community and of attempting to resolve their problems through the form of art, of philosophically questioning their existence. The Rutledges best illustrate these concerns and symbolise what McGahern clearly admired and questioned in the work of art: 'What is style but the reflection of personality in language, and that surely is the spirit of that person?'<sup>159</sup>

### **'Love of the World': the right way to live**

If admirable individuals in McGahern's novels appear burdened by the problems of others, they are usually mentally alert in this process and their moral rectitude is unquestionably elevated. The fiction is a kind of wisdom that forces us, as readers, to think about our lives and our priorities, our desire for happiness and fulfilment, and

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<sup>156</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, p. 91.

<sup>157</sup> 'A Private World', dir. Pat Collins.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> 'An Interview with John McGahern', James Whyte, *History, Myth, and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern*, p. 230.

to make critical decisions which either separate us from the shock of violence and injustice, or force us to judge its perpetrators with disapproval, inevitably enlightening us through the transformative power of the mind.

John Kenny sums up McGahern's style in a simple word: 'tact'.<sup>160</sup> As both man and writer, he seemed to invoke a philosophical approach to both personal and public matters. The author did not exercise the same fiery desperation, the propensity for extravagance or irascibility that we find in the life of Joyce or O'Flaherty. He also refused to lash out at his contemporaries in the way that Kavanagh demanded, during a time when he was deemed a social outcast by the Church authorities, which he curiously chose to defend in connection with his own life. His personality appeared more measured and controlled, which may explain his admiration for Yeats, whom he describes as 'a very great poet' who 'laid down a whole framework in which an indigenous literature could establish traditions and grow'.<sup>161</sup> That McGahern's fiction grew out of this tradition is most certain and it is clear that he was more interested in a life of contemplation over action, sharing Yeats' abhorrence towards the extremes of violence and injustice that seemed to dominate Irish life and society in modern Ireland.<sup>162</sup> What can be said is that where Yeats' concern is with a more public exploration of individual identity in Ireland

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<sup>160</sup> 'John McGahern's sophistication was proven rather than belied by his characteristic modesty, mannerliness and amicability, his particular sense of the social inscribed in one of his favourite words: tact', John Kenny, 'A last bow – now applaud', review of *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Short Stories*, *The Irish Times*, 2 Dec, 2006.

<sup>161</sup> McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', *Love of the World: Essays* p. 92.

<sup>162</sup> It is likely that McGahern's viewpoint on this subject is illustrated when Rutledge converses with the Republican activist, Jimmy Joe McKiernan, and remarks: 'I don't like violence', *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, p. 302.

within the limits of poetic dialogue (in poems such as 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' or 'Easter 1916'), McGahern looks to capture an inner private life, focusing primarily on 'style'.<sup>163</sup> There is an interesting connection with Flaubert's elevated notion of retreat from society here, a desire to withdraw into solitude and possibly escape from the essential conflict with community. A critique of McGahern's late novel *Amongst Women*, explains this process, when he describes this work as glorifying 'nothing but life itself, and fairly humble life. All its violence is internalised within a family, is not public or political; but is not therefore, a lesser evil.'<sup>164</sup> If McGahern is interested in keeping the novel separate from the public and political ideas which surround it, it is difficult to accept that a character like Moran in *Amongst Women* acquires his power and status simply from within himself and he certainly becomes synonymous in McGahern's mind with the tyranny of the Cootehall Barracks and his father's own mercurial temperament, emblematic of the theocratic or patriarchal state that envelops him.<sup>165</sup> Moran rarely confides in his daughters and sets up the image of himself as a figure who is acting in the interests of others, operating either on behalf of the family unit (Rose and the children) or in support of the individual (praying for McQuaid), when his sole purpose is to maintain control of his own state of affairs. It is perfectly clear that the family is defined by his personality alone: 'individual selves' who gather 'close to a single

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<sup>163</sup> In 'Censorship', McGahern mentions his admiration for Flaubert's clarity and precision in 'style', *Love of the World: Essays*, p. 97.

<sup>164</sup> McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', *Love of the World: Essays*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>165</sup> 'I believe it's not too crude to say that Church and State had colluded to bring about a climate that was insular, repressive, sectarian', 'Censorship', *Love of the World: Essays*, p. 97.

presence', ensuring that 'together' they become 'the aristocratic Morans of Great Meadow, a completed world'.<sup>166</sup>

The exploitation of women and the wider family unit is more poignantly felt in one of McGahern's finest short stories, 'Love of the World'. The principal themes are once again the dialogue between the public and private world of the individual, and the destructive effects of domestic violence on the nature of both self and community. The preoccupation with the violent father figure is evident from the beginning: Guard Harkin is a famous Gaelic footballer for County Mayo, a man who proves volatile and controlling beneath a 'polite' exterior. The narrative focuses on his marriage to Kate Rutledge, a quiet and sensitive country girl. The anonymous narrator of the story claims to be Kate's cousin and paints a caring and sensitive appreciation of her life, whilst objectively portraying insight into the character of her husband and the motivation behind his behaviour and personality, as we learn from the early moments of the story: 'Harkin did not drink. Already he felt comfortable in the house. It was a house where he felt he wasn't expected to be anything other than himself. There was a generous side to the guard's nature'.<sup>167</sup>

We soon learn that 'the generous virtues' can be 'ruinous' and that Harkin is a flawed character who echoes John Quinn's philosophy that 'too much politeness' can be a hindrance in the world of business.<sup>168</sup> He is a man consumed by vanity and egotism and his mere generosity or 'sense of self' stems from a desire to be viewed in

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>167</sup> John McGahern, 'Love of the World', *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories*, p. 338.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.



a positive light in the world outside of his mind, evident from his initial conversation with Kate's father. Here we are told: 'The young Guard went on to ridicule his immediate superiors and to expand his sense of self to very attentive listeners'.<sup>169</sup> This passage is significant because of the effect that Harkin's personality has on the individuals and community to which he is connected. The narrator explains this concern in the opening lines by reflecting on the feelings of a small rural community where 'Nothing much happens', and where people are constantly 'craving for word of every sound and sighting', but 'when something violent and shocking happens, nobody will speak at all after the first shock wave passes into disbelief'.<sup>170</sup>

The focus of McGahern's story is once again on a kind of private world in which feelings of love, sensitivity and compassion are recognised as important. These emotions are weighed against the more brutal aspects of human nature present in personalities like Harkin, an individual motivated solely by the need for consumption of the material world.<sup>171</sup> Kate's father recognises that this man is 'full of himself' and expresses concern that his daughter is not going 'to have an easy life', as a result.<sup>172</sup> It is evident early in the story that the seeds of the destruction of a family unit, or of individual personalities themselves, are felt to be instinctive, predictable perhaps. There is also an interesting contrast created between the

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> McGahern, 'Love of the World', *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 336.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 356.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

intimate relationship between Kate's parents, a marriage that is based on a shared sense of values, of trust, interaction and sensitive dialogue (a love which is mutually felt, as with Joe and Kate Rutledge), and the unstable union between Harkin and Kate. The doomed relationship is dominated by the man's personal selfishness in seeking to dominate his wife and mould her in the way that he sees fit, and it is a psychological reminder for McGahern of how his own father mistreated his mother in the past.

The concern with how much the community itself is responsible for the way in which Harkin behaves is implied throughout the story. McGahern at least realises the possibility that others must share some responsibility for what happens in the way that Harkin responds to his estrangement:

He had been deeply shaken by the way people turned away from him once he ceased to be a star, [. . .] This constant attention had been so long a part of his everyday life that he had come to take it as much for granted as air or bad health. When suddenly it disappeared, he was baffled: he was the same person now as when he had dominated centrefields, and it gnawed at the whole structure of his self-esteem, forcing in on him the feeling that he no longer amounted to anything.<sup>173</sup>

This passage brings us back to the theme of morality and the self, explored in Chapter 1: that preoccupation with the epiphany or the moment of self-recognition for characters like James Duffy in 'A Painful Case'. Stephen Dedalus' spiritual battle with his 'conscience' in *A Portrait*, the struggle with his Catholic upbringing and

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

what he calls 'the silent lapse of his soul', convinces him that he must rely on his own nature to overcome the quarrel with his surroundings, that he is 'destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world'.<sup>174</sup> In 'Love of the World' the opposite is the case: the fault rests mainly with the character of Harkin, despite the restrictive and prying nature of his community. He is too blind to see that his own personality has become so dependent on the society surrounding it that he cannot ever come to terms with his sudden reversal of fortune. He 'takes for granted' his position of privilege, feeling that it is something that is essentially a part of him, when in fact it exists outside of him.

The same preoccupation surfaces in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* in the passage which begins inside the mind of Mary (Jamesie's wife). In typical Yeatsian fashion, this character observes how her son and daughter-in-law have changed over time and ponders the question of 'how much time had disappeared and emerged again in such strange and substantial forms that were or were not her own', only to conclude with a sense of confusion: 'how can time be gathered in and kissed? There is only flesh'.<sup>175</sup> In one sense the implication here is that we can only understand our individual identities simply by what exists for us in the present, in the physical world that exists before our eyes. But by placing his or her nature at the heart of the imagination, the great artist discovers an alternative point of view, one which

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<sup>174</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 136.

<sup>175</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, pp. 131-132.

focuses on memory or an individual's inner, more spiritual values. Here the writer can reach an 'unapproachable' realm of the imagination.<sup>176</sup> Kavanagh refers to this as a kind of 'Parnassian authority', a state of mind where time is merely an artificial construct that is secondary to what is forever constant in ourselves: the reality of the soul at the centre of the personality.<sup>177</sup>

Modern neuroscience rejects the idea of an immortal soul in the Platonic sense, claiming that 'the self is an illusion created by our brain', that our memories can be defective or unreliable.<sup>178</sup> This might suggest that there can be no unified self for anyone simply because of the way that the brain works, constantly changing throughout our lives. The problem with this theory is defined by the neuroscientists themselves, who accept that 'At present we do not know how a physical system like the brain could ever produce those non-physical experiences like the conscious self'.<sup>179</sup> If the existence of 'consciousness' cannot be explained definitively by science, a more complete sense of self may be found instinctively or spiritually through the work of art, in the feeling that our personalities are connected to something deeper within us, like an 'unapproachable' soul.<sup>180</sup> Through this philosophy, there can no longer be a sense of confusion in the quarrel between self and other. McGahern's

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<sup>176</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Signposts', *Collected Prose*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Bruce Hood, *The Self Illusion: Who Do You Think You Are?* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd, 2011), 'Prologue: The Reflected Self', xi.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Many philosophers and academics today believe in the existence of the soul. Richard Swinburne argues that humans 'consist of two separate parts—soul and body—and that (pure) mental events are goings-on in the soul, while physical events are goings-on in the body [. . .] our thoughts and feelings are not just phenomena caused by goings-on in the brain', see revised edition of *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 2007), ix-p.1.

literature is connected to the literature of Yeats, Joyce, Kavanagh and O'Flaherty in this way, where the personality of the writer exists at the heart of all great literature, establishing a more concrete understanding of self and community. This is Guard Harkin's fundamental flaw: by relying solely on the external world for the gratification of his needs, he denies his own moral courage and the contemplation of a spiritual and private life within. An immediate contrast can be found in the life of his wife, Kate, whose perspective is closer to McGahern's own mother and therefore the artist's own particular values as an individual:

Now it was through this new concentration – and the simple walk from school [. . .] that each day had been given back to her in its long light and depth, all the actions and interactions of the day, between the setting out and the returning, a reflection of the mystery of the whole blessed gift of life. She had nearly lost that gift [. . .] She had no other wish than to live her life and to bring up her children in peace.<sup>181</sup>

The difference between Kate's epiphany and James Duffy's dreaded insight of failure and loss of love could not be more evident. McGahern here establishes a process by which simple common values are not only shown to be morally and ethically sound, but transformative in the life of individual and society. How do we know that he is mainly concerned with this theory of establishing 'peace' within the self, resolving the quarrel between self and community? McGahern expresses through Kate's imaginatively 'new concentration' a positive window into her soul,

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<sup>181</sup> McGahern, 'Love of The World', *Creatures of the Earth*, p. 349.

the only way of renewing an understanding of self, of steering clear from the obsession with the physical world, which can easily lead to the violence or selfishness of which Harkin is capable.

The same feeling is created in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* in the moments following Mary's thoughts about Jim and his wife. The focus suddenly shifts into the mind of Joe Rutledge, whose interest is more specifically on the nature of this inner life. Rutledge observes Mary's son, Jim, and privately concludes that he is 'a quiet, courteous man' who could only be successful up to a point because 'The people who could promote him to the highest rung would have to be interacted with and could not be studied like a problem or a book'.<sup>182</sup> The observations of Jim's wife are even more telling: she is described as drawing 'all her life [from] outside herself, especially from the impression she imagined she was making on other people, and her dark good looks and sexual attractiveness helped this primal conceit'.<sup>183</sup> She is someone who uses forms of 'mere politeness as unqualified endorsements', much like John Quinn and Harkin. We soon realise from the way that Quinn's relationship develops from separation to failure, and from the fact that Harkin's marriage results in the murder of his wife, that this is not the right way to live. The character's subsequent imprisonment and suicide only proves that such perspectives on life are nothing short of disastrous, both for the individuals concerned and their respective communities.

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<sup>182</sup> McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, p. 132.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

### **The self as 'total personality': Jung, Joyce and the formation of Irish identity**

The one certainty when it comes to understanding the self from the point of view of Irish writers like McGahern is that there must be a recognised distinction between the way that a person thinks, their essential 'consciousness' or perspective on things, and the fixed nature of the individual personality. This particular philosophy is rooted in the writings of Carl Jung in works such as 'Researches into the phenomenology of the self', in which he makes a direct contrast between the ego, which he defines as 'the centre of the field of consciousness [. . .] the subject of all personal acts of consciousness', and what the personality is as a complete 'phenomenon':

Clearly, then, *the personality as a total phenomenon* does not coincide with the ego, that is, with the conscious personality, but forms an entity that has to be distinguished from the ego [. . .] I have suggested calling the total personality which, though present, cannot be fully known, the self. The ego is, by definition, subordinate to the self and is related to it like a part to the whole.<sup>184</sup>

Jung's theory appears to illustrate many of the feelings about the self which we find expressed by artists like Kavanagh and McGahern: that longing for the emergence of inner truth or freedom which is the true reflection of the personality, reacting against

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<sup>184</sup> Carl Jung, 'AION: researches into the Phenomenology of the Self: C. G. Jung, Second Edition', *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol 9, Part II, p.5 (italics are the author's). James Whyte argues that the overpowering sense of ritual and myth in McGahern's fiction 'reflects the influence' of Jung's psychology, although he does not identify connections with Jung's theory of '*the personality as a total phenomenon*', see Whyte, *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern*, pp. 102-103.

any form of pretension or dishonesty. The motivations of each artist may also have deeper roots in Freud's tripartite model of the psyche (*id*, *ego*, and *superego*), in that the projection of the self is produced through instinctive or 'mental processes of which they are unaware and over which they have no control'.<sup>185</sup> But whereas Freud's interest is in explaining human behaviour mainly in terms of repressed sexuality or desires, Jung's idea of existing *archetypes* or 'the collective unconscious' creates a framework for understanding a universal life force or psychic exchange between one generation of people (or artists) and the next.<sup>186</sup> He also claims that 'just as our free will clashes with the necessity in the outside world, so also it finds its limits outside the field of consciousness in the subjective inner world, where it comes into conflict with the facts of the self'.<sup>187</sup> His central argument is that the 'ego', as the subject of all 'personal acts of consciousness', has a degree of 'freedom' within the subconscious, but it always remains in conflict with that which has complete authority over it: the all-encompassing self.<sup>188</sup> This may explain why individuals motivated by their own subconscious desires and self-gratification in McGahern's fiction can never really feel satisfied in their 'love of the world'; they are forever in quarrel with themselves.

A central preoccupation in modern Irish writing, beginning with nineteenth-century poets like Mangan, is the desire for an honest or 'sincere'

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<sup>185</sup> Raymond Martin and John Barressi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 245.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> Carl Jung, 'AION: researches into the Phenomenology of the Self: C. G. Jung, Second Edition', p. 5.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*



reflection of self and personality through the artistic 'spirit' or 'soul'. The same feeling is effectively demonstrated, one might say even transformed, in the writings of Yeats and Joyce. Kavanagh emulates this particular intellectual and spiritual tradition by calling upon 'the artist's spirit of adventure and courage' in the face of poverty and public humiliation, agreeing with O'Flaherty that the writer must remain 'true to [his] own soul'.<sup>189</sup> A similar concern is illustrated in Joyce's *A Portrait* through the words of Stephen Dedalus, during his discussion with the students Davin and Cranly in the final chapter:

— No honourable or sincere man, said Stephen, has given up to you his life and his youth and his affections from the days of Tone to those of Parnell but you sold him to the enemy or failed him in need or reviled him and left him for another [. . .]

— They died for their ideals, Stevie, said Davin. Our day will come yet, believe me.

Stephen, following his own thought, was silent for a moment.

— The soul is born, he said vaguely, first in those moments I told you of. It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight.<sup>190</sup>

Davin represents the outer man who ensures that the politics of 'his country comes first' before any talk of the 'romantic' ramblings of the 'poet' or 'mystic'. It is certain that both Stephen and Joyce disagree: the writer reacts against the 'nets' of his community because he longs to express the inner spiritual life, the sense of his own complete personality, rather than what is expected of him by others. This does

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<sup>189</sup> O'Flaherty to Garnett, August 1923, *The Letters of Liam O'Flaherty*, p. 36.

<sup>190</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 170-171.

not mean that he ignores the particular historical or political realities of the nation: for Dedalus and Joyce the history of Tone and Parnell are bound up with themes of betrayal and deceit which are reflective not only of the long annals of Irish history, but of human nature on a universal scale. Beginning with Tone is significant because he publically represents, perhaps for the first time in modern Irish history, that need to assert a 'united' view of Irishmen or selfhood in Ireland and it is Parnell who carries on this legacy in the advent of the Home Rule movement. Joyce took his inspiration directly from poets like Mangan, born into this tense political climate, a country that longed to assert a sense of collective selfhood, explored in poems like 'Dark Rosaleen' or 'The Nameless One', that early preoccupation in nineteenth-century Irish literature with the soul:

Roll forth, my song, like the rushing river  
That sweeps along to the mighty sea;  
God will inspire me while I deliver  
My soul of thee!<sup>191</sup>

Mangan's cry for artistic and spiritual freedom was mirrored in the assertion of the political movements of his time, feelings injected into the nationalistic rhetoric of the *Nation* and the poetry of Thomas Davis, or in John Mitchel's call for radical political reform in works like *Jail Journal* (1854). This coincided with the revitalisation or renewal of cultural values, the translation of Gaelic literature found in the poetry of Samuel Ferguson, so much an inspiration for O'Grady's interest in the heroic cycles

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<sup>191</sup> James Clarence Mangan, 'The Nameless One', selected from ed. Brendan Kennelly, *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 161.

and literature of Ireland.

Yeats was similarly influenced by these personalities and by the Anglo-Irish tradition, seeing himself as part of 'a company' working towards the establishment of a more definitive and concrete understanding of the Irish self. The romantic isolation of the artist was still evident in the need to express an identity free from bondage or a recognisable slave mentality, and for most artists personal liberty was to be found within the inner reaches of the soul. Mangan identified this with his particular Catholic upbringing, as did Joyce and Kavanagh, and so he looked inwardly for salvation and 'protection' from the quarrel with others in 'The Nameless One':

And tell how trampled, derided, hated,  
And worn by weakness, disease and wrong,  
He fled for shelter to God, who mated  
His soul with song —<sup>192</sup>

We learn from these lines that the artist can express the truth about himself and community because he is not concerned solely with the physical pleasures of life: he is interested in the spiritual state of individual and nation. Kavanagh's quest precedes and influences McGahern's, when he recognises towards the end of his life, in the face of hardship and financial difficulties, that the only way forward is to 'go inland', to search for 'a positive world' where 'we do not lose love's resolution'.<sup>193</sup> A similar conflict is evident when Stephen Dedalus offers insight into Aristotle's view

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<sup>192</sup> James Clarence Mangan, 'The Nameless One', p. 161.

<sup>193</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Prelude', *The Complete Poems*, pp. 275-276.

of art or Aquinas' concept of 'beauty' in conversation with his fellow students. The dialogue is momentarily interrupted by the appearance of Donovan, a 'fat young man, wearing a silk neckcloth', who is more interested in exam results and eating his sister's 'pancakes' than he is with the discussing the holistic nature of life and art.<sup>194</sup>

This virtual obsession with what happens in the public domain still prevails in society today, a world consumed by emphasis on the physical image, on developments in scientific and mathematical fields, rather than on the inner life of the individual. It is apparent that Joyce builds into his novel the evident tensions between the two: 'that every physical quality admired by men in women is in direct connection with the manifold functions of women for the propagation of the species', a theory which would seem to suggest 'that the world is drearier' than we 'imagined', simply because it 'leads to eugenics rather than to esthetic'.<sup>195</sup> It is a recognisable battle between self and other, the feud between those who pay homage to the 'necessary phases of artistic apprehension [. . .] the qualities of universal beauty' or the interest in 'wholeness, harmony and radiance' (of which Aquinas speaks), and those who are merely steeped in a love of the 'flesh' alone.<sup>196</sup> This quarrel explains Dedalus' Aristotelian concern with the fact that 'improper art', arouses the reality of conflict between 'kinetic' emotions of 'desire' and 'loathing' and what is considered 'static': that sense of peace for which McGahern is forever searching. The true artist essentially demands resolution of conflict, transcending the

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<sup>194</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 177.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

quarrel with others through the purgation of emotions - what Dedalus calls 'the esthetic emotion', where the mind 'is arrested and raised above desire and loathing'.<sup>197</sup>

When we consider this tradition of debate in Irish literature between self and other, it is necessary to question how much it is still relevant in the lives of people today. This is especially significant given that in the early twenty-first century we are forever embracing notions of a global society, influenced largely by modern mobility and the internet. The traces of tradition and the inevitable transition to modernity is perhaps a subject most imaginatively realised in the poetry of Heaney and the drama of Friel, which requires some consideration in the concluding section of this research. Either of these writers could have been selected as the subject of analysis in this dissertation, and likewise female counterparts such as Mary Lavin, Edna O'Brien or Jennifer Johnston, because their literature somehow questions modern notions of selfhood and identity in Ireland or because they are living in constant dialogue with the Northern Irish Troubles. The latter issue, though familiar and considered in works like *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, is not a place or subject which McGahern is willing to probe in any considerable depth, which leaves a gap between his literature and the fiction of the present. His chief concern is personal, a battle with that interminable dialogue between self and soul, seeking to express his whole

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

personality and the world as he knows it through the medium of art.<sup>198</sup> By doing this, he effectively explores himself and the society around him and that supreme longing for ultimate happiness and the good life, a 'love of the world' based on a sincere set of moral values, an understanding of contemporary society, and the particular quarrels and preoccupations which motivate us. These anxieties exist in the personal and public sphere of McGahern's fiction and they are facts which ultimately define his art. Fiction forces him into the spiritual world of the imagination, to 'the prism of language many coloured and richly storied from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions', where he is ultimately searching, like Joyce and all the great masters before him, for something close to 'the enchantment of the heart'.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Sampson claims in *Young John McGahern*, p. 58: 'the redemption of the personal life is central to his [McGahern's] whole work'.

<sup>199</sup> The first quotation appears inside the mind of Dedalus on his wanderings from the University to the Strand, *A Portrait*, pp. 140 and 'the enchantment of the heart' is described as Luigi Galvani's explanation of art, p. 179.

## Conclusion: the moral nature of the self

Morality and the search for the good life are central to the work of art, and the great writer in any society is certain of one essential fact: nature is for this particular individual much more significant than nurture. This research has considered why five major Irish writers appeared in conflict with their communities, struggling with personal or political issues to expose injustices on a universal scale. It is not the case that such concerns are restricted to a particular culture or period: Dickens, Poe, Milosz, Solzhenitsyn, Marquez, are but a few names from different literary cultures where a similar project could be gleaned. As far as all these writers are concerned, only those who rely on what their society expects of them, who follow what they are told to do, rather than what they believe to be their instinctive vocation, are in denial of their true selves. Perhaps this is what William Blake meant when he asserted that he must 'create' his own system or risk being enslaved by another man's.<sup>1</sup>

Joyce was particularly conscious that 'Nations, like individuals, have their egos' and he was equally aware that the artist would create out of a local scene an understanding of the universal, something that could be found deep 'in the smithy of [his] soul'.<sup>2</sup> He recognised that great art was a sincere and ethical search to discover the truth about oneself, in reaction against the constraints of environment.

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<sup>1</sup> The lines from Blake's poem 'Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion' (1804-1820) actually read: 'I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's'.

<sup>2</sup> James Joyce, 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages', *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 111; *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 213.

We might question today whether or not Irish culture is unique in its efforts to establish the quarrel between self and community within its literature; but what we cannot deny is that the Irish people are shaped by their own volatile history, dominated by a constant quest to understand their identity, in respect to the politics of division within their country, of defining the nature of life (at least since the nineteenth century) according to the opposite political ideologies of Nationalism and Unionism. Ireland is often treated differently from other Western cultures such as Britain, France or the United States, simply because it is considered in these separate terms, in relation to division and fragmentation rather than the more comfortable image of geographical cohesion.<sup>3</sup> This view does not always consider the distinct parishes and communities which exist in Ireland or that the geographical isolation of one territory may not always have a direct connection with violence and sectarianism. Even in the imagination of people living outside of Ireland, a person born and reared in the country will often be considered 'Irish' by definition, regardless of geographical boundaries or how people on the island interpret their personal identities.

It is often taken as fact that Western societies have an established sense of core values which define both self and community through the medium of democracy, free speech or human rights. This argument is often used to promote the theory of the plurality of culture, the porous nature of the 'global society' which seemingly

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<sup>3</sup> As explored in F. S. L. Lyons' work, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland: 1890-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).



exists today. Perhaps these views can have reverse effects, effectively framing 'culture' as something fixed and certain, something that exists without question. Can these perspectives explain the suspicion and mistrust that Western states hold over any external country's desire to assert self-governance through political discourse or revolutionary struggle: the politics of 'other' rather than the recognised values of 'self' and community?<sup>4</sup> Joyce hinted at this process in the public lecture he delivered in Trieste in 1907, expounding the forgotten history of Ireland's cultural past and its attempts to forge a new political identity in the present, when he asserted:

It may seem strange that an island such as Ireland, so remote from the centre of culture, should have become a school for apostles. However, even a superficial review shows us that the Irish nation's desire to create its own civilization is not so much the desire of a young nation wishing to link itself to Europe's concert, but the desire by an ancient nation to renew in a modern form the glories of a past civilization.<sup>5</sup>

Joyce is confident about certain facts: there is no clear-cut or black and white view of Irish history and culture because the people, the leaders, the revolutionaries of the past, had as much foreign blood running in their veins as they had Celtic; but he is likewise conscious of the fact that Ireland's 'glorious past', the intellectual heritage of an island of Saints and Sages was 'not a self-glorying invention' either.<sup>6</sup> Yeats was also aware of this reality, which is why he took seriously the notion of 'a romantic

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<sup>4</sup> The modern reactions to the violence perpetrated by the 'Islamic State' or even recent Russian territorial expansion in the Crimea, are extreme examples of the conflict between Western values of self and other. The radical actions of ISIS, in particular, are considered to be outside the scope of Western comprehension and rationality. Consequently, a clear distinction is drawn between what is considered to be terrorist activity and any demands for political or religious liberty.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce, 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages', p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

Ireland dead and gone' and its connection with historical personages and factual events. That he invented a fictional world of the imagination in poetry, drama and prose is certain; and that he became 'the founder of this new literature', synonymous with a new way of conceiving Irish identity and the self (often through the form of a mask), is also true. His international reputation was well-established by the time of his death in 1939 and he continues to influence people from different cultures and traditions, particularly in the way that Ireland is represented or interpreted on a global scale.<sup>7</sup>

The path Yeats chose was a conscious one, where it seems he could always imagine or envisage a culture which drew its strength from the myths and traditions of the Gaelic past. Though he was not alone in achieving the Celtic revival, his legacy lives on, ensuring that Ireland is still rich in memories of a native language and history, being home to local and distinctive dialects and a love of traditional music. For many people living in the country, 'Ireland' is not an invention at all; it is native to the land and people who live there, rooted in the cultural values and language of tradition, where Gaelic football and hurling are native Irish sports in the same way that cricket or baseball are local to English or American culture. Those individuals living in Ireland who do not always identify with such traditions or a particular way of life, are in no way less Irish than the people who do; they merely offer an

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Kearney argues: 'Disillusioned with the 'hard ideologies' which have defined us according to a single, unadulterated 'identity' (Nationalist, Unionist, Catholic, Protestant) [. . .] does not amount, in any sense, to a repudiation of their Irish culture, or indeed to a denial of a specifically 'Irish thing' about their work. On the contrary, each acknowledges a fundamental sense of belonging and fidelity to a 'native place', *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s* (Dublin, Wolfhound, 1988), p. 186.

alternative view of this culture or their own personal identity which may have contrasting political, religious or social connotations, as in any recognisable country.<sup>8</sup>

What is particularly revealing about this debate on the nature of Irish culture is that Frank O'Connor, a realist writer who in many ways reacted against the Yeatsian romantic tradition, believed that the Irish had deliberately chosen the imagination over the intellect in the creation of a real and 'a unique thing in [their] history' and literature.<sup>9</sup> He concluded that 'the Irish self' existed and that Irish literature, despite its 'backward look' and dire dependency on the distant past, was 'a real subject' and if it was not recognised as such then 'all subjects of our criticism are likewise dreams'.<sup>10</sup> Ireland's patriots and its writers (Pearse, Cuchulain and Yeats respectively) were motivated, he claimed, by some peculiar 'force outside themselves', defined not by the rational mind alone, but by something closer to the spiritual or the instinctual.<sup>11</sup>

Though Church history and the Catholic tradition had significant parts to play in forging Irish identity, Joyce did not forget the damage caused by English colonial aggression and of the great price to be paid for the inability to express selfhood and nationhood collectively in Ireland. He claimed that 'The economic and

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<sup>8</sup> Consider the articles in the Good Friday Agreement (1998) which assert the right of the people of Northern Ireland to be considered either Irish or British: 'the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction there shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions [. . .] of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both communities'.

<sup>9</sup> Frank O'Connor, *The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

intellectual conditions of his homeland do not permit the individual to develop. The spirit of the country has been weakened by centuries of useless struggle and broken treaties. Individual initiative has been paralysed by the influence and admonitions of the church, while the body has been shackled by peelers, duty officers and soldiers'.<sup>12</sup> This is a feeling reiterated by writers like O'Flaherty and Kavanagh in their attacks upon the Church or state institutions surrounding them, when they ask questions such as: why do the Irish people have to endure 'the dung around the pretty altars', or 'why are they leaving the country in their thousands? What they are seeking is the enthusiasm for life'.<sup>13</sup> The economic crisis in 2010 reminds us of this recurring problem in Ireland. What Joyce sought, as a consequence, was some form of imaginative escape from the dilemma, one which would ensure like Yeats, Kavanagh, O'Flaherty and McGahern, a way in which the soul could survive or transcend the horrors of religious and imperial domination. He achieved this by forging an artistic personality which could exist both within and beyond the work of art itself. The writers in this study are unique for such reasons: sharing a common set of values and a determination to highlight the particular realities and concerns of the nation in a time of great change. They succeed in reflecting the spiritual needs of their people and give us a sense of a culture that once was and that still has meaning

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<sup>12</sup> James Joyce, 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages', *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> O'Flaherty, 'Censorship in Ireland', ed. James M. Cahalan, *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction*, p.118. Reprinted from "The Irish Censorship," *American Spectator* 1 (November 1932): 2; Kavanagh, 'Victory Of Mediocrity', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, Vol. No. 1, Saturday, April 12, 1952, p. 1.

and resonance in our society today.<sup>14</sup> Their reaction is, as Kavanagh claims, against the 'materialism' of the age.<sup>15</sup>

The Irish writer is always conscious of the general 'confusion' surrounding identity, the sense of oppression against the inner values of the self. If Yeats was steeped in reviving a forgotten culture, those artists who followed him recognised, like Joyce, the simple fact that 'our civilisation is an immense woven fabric' of 'different elements'.<sup>16</sup> This explains why Brian Friel, recognisably one of the finest playwrights of modern times, explores this theme in his play *Translations*. Friel's drama takes us back to a transitional moment in the cultural history of Ireland, the all-defining period of the Anglicisation of Gaelic place names and the introduction of the National schools to somehow make sense of our history, to translate the displacement, to recognise that it is not always 'the literal past' or the 'facts of history' that we see recorded, but a mere interpretation of it, somehow 'embodied in language'.

Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1966) is a play which also dramatizes a special interest in how personal identity in Irish society can be interpreted through the imagination, witnessed in the dramatic dialogue on stage between the Public and Private aspects of our nature, which establishes a link with Beckett's concern about

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<sup>14</sup> Paraphrasing Kavanagh's words: 'Culture is always something that was', 'Memory of Brother Michael', *Patrick Kavanagh: Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn, p.119.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Joyce, 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages', *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, p. 118.

‘the tricks that memory plays!’<sup>17</sup> It is a philosophy concerned with the formation of modern Irish selfhood and the late Friel’s drama reminds us of that literary tradition which relied on memory, history and the individual personality to understand ourselves.

A similar quarrel between self and society existed for Seamus Heaney. One of the great misfortunes of this research is that during the writing of the opening chapters, the poet was still alive and well; his recent death has sent shockwaves through the literary world, leaving nothing short of a deep chasm or gulf to be filled in the realm of poetry. Heaney was the world’s leading poet and his writing in many ways has helped to bridge the gap between the parochial world of Kavanagh and McGahern, through to preoccupations with modern technology in the urban world of today: ‘an age of bare hands/and cast iron,’ where ‘Anything can happen’ and ‘the tallest towers’ can ‘Be overturned’ in the blink of an eye.<sup>18</sup> Recent collections like *District and Circle* (2006) embrace these realities and recall the earlier Yeatsian concern with the ‘filthy modern tide’, encroaching on a traditional, personal or subjective world of the imagination. Here we find ourselves being ‘transported’ once again ‘Through the galleried earth [. . .] of all that [we] belonged to’, whilst Heaney fuses the realities of the known physical world with the inner life of the poet, his recollections of his father and the Irish tradition reflected ‘in a window mirror-

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Extraordinary the tricks that memory plays!’ *Waiting for Godot* (London, Faber and Faber, 1956), p. 50. This statement follows Estragon’s admission that he is ‘unhappy’, which draws further parallels with McGahern’s and Friel’s interest in the links between memory, happiness and the self.

<sup>18</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Anything Can Happen’, *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 13.

backed/By blasted weeping rock-walls/Flicker-lit'.<sup>19</sup> The poet's struggle within, his desire to penetrate that 'door into the dark', to make sense of his own self and surroundings are embraced much earlier in his career through an honest reflective style, noticeable in poems such as 'Personal Helicon', where he gracefully admits: 'I rhyme to see myself/To set the darkness echoing'.<sup>20</sup> These lines mark the end of Heaney's first collection of poetry, a tribute to his preoccupation with the tradition of this inner life, the beginning of that quest to resolve the quarrel with his surroundings, most potently embodied in the 'Bog Poems', a poetry that symbolises, through stark and disturbing imagery, the nature of violence and the 'tribal, intimate revenge' of the modern Irish 'troubles'.<sup>21</sup>

In this light, what, now, is the future of Irish literature, in a period when 'hope and history' might possibly rhyme together? It is difficult to say, except that there is an inextricable link between what we consider to be the right way to live, the choice of pursuing peace, of building scaffolds for the future and the sense of our own personal selves at the centre. Irish identity, with its hotbed of political wrangling and sectarian divisions, reaches out for a new beginning, one which McGahern's fiction clearly embodies in his way of envisaging a redefinition of self and community. The Irish people have the choice to envisage their own sense of self, looking to the past for inspiration or to the future with a sense of passion and enthusiasm. The five writers in this study are necessary for creating that sense of

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<sup>19</sup> Heaney, 'District and Circle', *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Heaney, 'Personal Helicon', *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Heaney, 'Punishment', *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 118.

identity in Ireland because they articulate a way of understanding our history and tradition through their writings. Collectively they define our society and culture, imagining a way forward in the pursuit of truth and sincerity, a deep and inward struggle which reaches out to challenge and make sense of the physical world. Their art was born out of the quarrel with others, an outlet through which they could come to terms with the spiritual truth of the self, and through this inner life resolve their various conflicts with community, helping us to make sense of the world we inhabit today.



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